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Dedicated to the 'downsized', everywhere.

G.L.

PROLOGUE

Sunday, 15 August 1995: Seoul, South Korea.

THE BOWED OLD woman walked slowly and carefully from the cab, not looking up at the awesome, twenty-floor office block that bore her nephew's name. She had never seen it before, not having been in Seoul for over forty years. The last time had been to pay her respects to her brother, killed fighting the Chinese in the Korean War. He had been shot dead just two days before the truce in 1953.

There was little for her to recognise in the teeming new Seoul, busier today than usual because of the fiftieth anniversary celebrations of the Japanese surrender. Of course, she well recalled the Royal Palace a block to the east, and she had looked impassively at the neighbouring Ch'angdokkung, the Palace of Illustrious Virtue. It would have saddened her to know that it had been used as Seoul's zoo until ten years earlier.

Ch'angdokkung leads on through a gate to Piwon, the Secret Garden covering seventy-eight acres. There had been an ancient law prohibiting any structures higher than the garden's walls. This was to protect the queens and princesses who spent their lives confined within the palace and garden. She noted now that

two buildings overlook these time-honoured walls – the modest twelve-floor headquarters of Hyundai, and Garden Tower. These were as nothing, however, to the tallest skyscraper in town, which that day sported a fifteen-storey banner in celebration of the liberation. 'Her' building, SGT's head office, was alongside this, decked in flags and bunting.

This was a day she had prepared for and feared for fifty years. How she longed for it to be over so she could return to her island of Chindo, and her peaceful days of calligraphy, meditation and shamanism. The bus had left at 6.40, taking over seven hours to reach Seoul – the driver playing maddening karaoke music all the way. She was wearing traditional white *banbok* Korean dress, with purple bow and trimmings which, with her long hair plaited tightly back and pinned with a wooden peg, were the result of careful preparation early that morning. By sitting very still on the long journey she had ensured there were few creases, and she still looked fresh and striking. A security guard, startled by her majestic appearance, bowed and held the door open for her. Sool Kyung-Wha went straight to the pretty young receptionist, announced herself with stiff formality, stated her business and waited, refusing to sit. East Asians put family before given names, and a dignified old lady called Sool meant just one thing – a close relation of the Chairman Founder.

There was a flurry of hurried, urgent messages between reception and Chairman Sool's assistant, and then finally with Sool Kay-Sheen himself.

'What does she want?' he demanded, shaken, having left an important meeting.

'Just that she must see you, Chairman,' the young male assistant replied, flushing, always disconcerted by anything unexpected.

'Did she check that I was even here today?' Sool travelled incessantly, and to find him in the headquarters office was by no means usual on a normal weekday, let alone a Sunday.

He was in only to attend an official ceremony reception later, and had decided to bring his people in for a meeting first, to make the best use of his time.

'It seems she just presented herself, and said she would wait until you came, Chairman.'

Smiling Garden Trading – its global corporate identity recently, and expensively, reduced to SGT – was a $25 billion industrial

conglomerate, founded by Sool in the late sixties. It now covered shipbuilding, car manufacture, home electronics and banking, and was the most recent entrant to the exclusive world of the thirty or so *chaebol*, the leading companies, mostly now second-generation dynasties, which dominate the Korean economy – including great corporations such as Samsung, Hyundai, Daewoo and Lucky Goldstar, now called LG.

Sool Kay-Sheen at fifty-one, and as a first-generation *chaebol*, was still treated as something of an outsider by the others. Quietly spoken and courteous, at least to SGT non-employees and his peers, he played by the traditional rules – mostly unwritten – of the *chaebol* club. His assistant, however, had never seen his chairman look so worried. It deeply unsettled him and he irrationally blamed himself, as always, for not being prepared in some way. Sool pushed him aside and walked quickly, almost running, to the elevator to greet his visitor personally.

As the doors opened he immediately saw the incongruous small figure, silhouetted against the sunlight. A sickening feeling of foreboding washed over him and he had to steel himself to approach her.

He bowed deeply 'Sool Kyung-Wha, my father's sister. You honour us with your visit.'

She met his bow with her own, matching but carefully not exceeding its depth. Then after a brief smiling silence, she locked him in eye contact – something normally avoided by Koreans as impolite When he rapidly broke off she finally spoke the words she had rehearsed these many long years.

'Sool Kay-Sheen. I have a message. A message from your mother.'

They had the immediate impact she had intended. His mother had taken her life when he was five, yet he still retained strong, if ethereal, memories of her. Slender, beautiful, but always unbearably sad.

Ashen faced and barely able to speak, he simply mouthed, 'Come. Please,' and led her to the private elevator to his office suite – the 'blue house' – on the top floor. She refused tea or even water from the minions who swarmed around them. Sool waved them away impatiently, and they were alone again.

He could not resist the great discourtesy of being direct with

her. 'Sister of my father. You tell me you have a message from my mother. I await it with all the patience I can command.'

His aunt looked at him with her formal face, knowing she was about to break the man. Her formal face was correct for such a situation. Like many women who live on Chindo Island, off the south-west coast, she was of the ancient shaman faith. Before coming she had consulted a hereditary *mudang* – a mystic priestess skilled in using magic to tell the future and to commune with the dead. The middle-aged, lower-class woman had held a *kosa* ritual, during which she had passed on a question to the long-dead sister. In response she sanctioned Kyung Wha's solemn mission, but ominously predicted the release of devils. Devils released by what she had called the Grave Song, which would cause great evil before they were at last conquered. Conquered – she foresaw – by a venerable and strong foreign woman. A woman never known by a man.

After a deliberate pause, to force Sool Kay-Sheen to compose himself, she began. 'The World War, our war with Japan, ended fifty years ago today. This you know.'

'There are official celebrations everywhere today, of course. I am the guest of the President later,' he replied. 'And at long last we will begin to demolish the Capitol Building.' This oddly neo-classic granite edifice was built by the Japanese in 1926, and used during the war as the colonial headquarters. Located at the end of Seoul's main boulevard, Sejongno, and obscuring the Kyongbokkung Palace, the brooding structure was now the National Museum. It remained an open sore for Koreans, however. The Japanese had sited it deliberately to subvert the ancient laws of geomancy according to which all the centuries-old palaces and temples of Seoul had been arranged, severing the line of power flowing from the throne hall through Kwanghwaamun. The city had lost its harmony with the universe. The axis of power on which the nation's fate hinged had been fatally tilted. Later that day, the top of the building's dome was to be symbolically removed, prior to full demolition in 1996. The ancient harmony would soon be restored.

Sool, like most of his countrymen, hated the Japanese for the war atrocities and long history of humiliation they had inflicted on his nation. The most visited area in the Hall of Independence at Chonan is the Japanese Aggression Hall. Each week, thousands of children are shown the waxwork tableaux of Japanese soldiers

beheading Korean men buried to their necks, and women being horribly tortured. A new statue to celebrate Korea's liberation had been erected outside. Sool enforced an unwritten rule that any suppliers wanting to do business with SGT should first visit the exhibition, just as some Israelis expect visitors to Jerusalem to experience the Holocaust memorial.

She noted the depth of his hatred, sadly, and continued. 'Your mother and I were close friends. I had the honour to assist as she left her intolerable life. The night before we sat together, and agreed that fifty years was long enough. I now think that fifty years is not long enough. I think that no time for what you are about to learn could ever be long enough. But I made a sacred promise. It is my duty. And you, Sool Kay-Sheen, must be strong.'

Now avoiding his eyes, and bending her head, she offered him a yellowing envelope. The shaking hand betrayed her formal face.

Sool stared before taking it, knowing somehow that when he did his life would never be the same.

1

6 November 1997

John Blake had just picked at his evening meal on the full Lufthansa London to Frankfurt flight. It was almost always full, the two cities still fighting for supremacy as financial capital of Europe.

When travelling alone he always much preferred a meal in his hotel, or better still in a nearby restaurant if it was not too late. Tonight there would be no nearby restaurant because the airport hotel was marooned in acres of airport facilities and feeder roads to the city centre and beyond. Two more Johnnie Walker Black Labels compensated for most things, however. He had only asked for one, but the attractive blonde stewardess had winked conspiratorially at him and left two. Perhaps the crew were overnighting at the hotel, he thought optimistically. He caught her eye as she passed again and lifted his glass slightly as a thank you. That secret smile again . . .? Or just the fruits of a damned good customer relations training programme.

Once decanted at the airport, he walked on autopilot to level A1 and waited five minutes for the hotel bus to take him on the three-minute journey, past the car park, to the Steigenberger.

Holding his suit-carrier he stood in line at the busy reception desk to check in. The place was indeed bustling with airline crews, but there was no sign yet of the girl. When at last it was his turn the receptionist took an imprint of his charge card, tapped into his computer screen and announced, a little theatrically Blake thought, that as a valued guest Mr Blake had been upgraded to the executive block. No-smoking room, as usual, Mr Blake.

The executive tower, with its own elevators, is to the left beyond the bar. Blake's practised eye had taken in the mix of people as he passed. There were a lot of attractive, fashionably dressed young things, mostly girls. Much too well dressed for crew. It looked like some kind of fashion or pop music convention. Many were wearing badges, and he noticed a now-unmanned registration desk opposite the bar by the entrance to the meeting rooms. That decided it. No lukewarm club sandwich in his room tonight. A quick shower and he would be back down.

The TV screen in his room welcomed Mr J. Blake. Hanging up his suit and shirts, he took the shower, quickly ran his shaver over the day's stubble and was downstairs in the bar within fifteen minutes – nursing another Black Label (*mit Wasser, ohne*, ohne, *Eis*), and a smoked turkey sandwich and frites on their way. Slipping off the barstool he found a table next to a group of the delegates. Three girls – eighteen, nineteenish – and a dark-skinned, perhaps Turkish man in his late twenties. All the girls were smoking long cigarettes and stubbing them out less than halfway through to create another chance to light up, with sexy flamboyance.

The girl directly facing noticed him watching her. She was dressed in what looked like a fabulously expensive soft black leather suit and had Bardot/Schiffer-like hair framing a face that was pretty yet very young for such packaging. Blake looked away immediately, embarrassed. At forty-two he was old enough to be her father, but no dirty old man. He just travelled too much, mostly alone. And all frequent fliers unwittingly become voyeurs – be they single, married or, like Blake, divorced.

Ten minutes later and the sandwich and frites arrived just before she did. He was sure it was her. The blonde stewardess had changed into casual, loosely cut trousers and sweater and her hair was now brushed out. She came towards him from the restaurant side of the bar, smiling her smile, and raised her hand, twinkling her fingers in greeting. Blake put down his plate, wiped his hands on the napkin

and started to get up, heart racing in anticipation. Without even seeing him, she swept by to the table immediately behind and kissed a waiting young man full on the lips.

Nobody had noticed the incident, but Blake felt foolish and annoyed with himself. Quickly downing the excellent sandwich and the whisky, he signed the bill, decided against even taking a look in the adjoining disco, and went back to his room, a tad *vin triste*. Just one more Black Label from the mini-bar, order that seven o'clock call, and then out with the files for tomorrow's meeting Blake was International Director of Globecom, the third-largest public relations group in the world. His job was to court and win big international clients, get close to their senior management – chairmen and chief executives – and, once the relationship was cemented by whichever local Globecom office had been picked to lead on the business, move rapidly on to the next multi-national prospect.

His file on SGT was bulging, and there was even more in his lap-top computer. He had presented four times to them already. Once in Frankfurt, their European headquarters, once in New York, and twice in Seoul to Chairman Sool himself. It had gone well – Blake had worked with the Koreans before – but so far there had been nothing but costs involved in the long courtship. Over $50,000 already, and no fees or firm contract yet in return. Most of the costs were coming from Blake's own budget. This all had to be pinned down tomorrow. From then on the meter would have to run. As his American colleagues put it, the candy shop would be closed. The thought cheered him up. He knew that when the fees did begin to roll they would be high, and give his end-of-year bonus a welcome boost. And they would further raise his star at Globecom. Despite the help from the various local offices, this would be very much his account win. He understood and liked Koreans. This had been noticed, especially by the shrewd but of late highly eccentric Chairman Sool. Blake had won the chairman's confidence, and in the end that was all that mattered in a *chaebol*. Nothing happened at SGT without Sool's say-so. They were all terrified of him. And if the stories that circulated were even half right, not without reason.

The huge worldwide account was all but in the bag and SGT and Chairman Sool were about to become a big part of Blake's life. Just one more Black Label to celebrate. Why not?

• • •

The fat Greek came out of his small, black-windowed sex shop, looked up and down the street, and then hurriedly locked the door and steel shutters. He cradled a paper grocery bag to his chest with both arms as if it were a Gucci briefcase containing the crown jewels. In his terms it did – and paper grocery bags don't get snatched by bums. Looking around again, he set off down West 40th Street from the junction with Seventh Avenue, walking quickly, his hat bowed into the wind on the bitterly cold New York November evening.

Richard Trent was stationed at his trigger point seventy-five yards away as leader of the five-man FBI street surveillance team. Making up the rest were, on foot, a female First Office Agent, positioned ahead in the direction they expected the Greek to go, and three other agents – a phoney 'Domino Pizza' delivery-bike man, and a 'Federal Express' van with a driver and spare footman sitting alongside. It was a team designed to cover the Greek if he walked, drove, took a cab, or shot down a subway.

They were using real-time reporting and Trent said, 'Go. Go! Foot. West.' He was throat-miked to a GP-300 two-way radio with covert fit.

In the jargon of professional watchers the Greek – Peter Pangalos – was a surveillance-aware target who would take evasive action as a matter of routine. His business was hard-core pornographic videos, shot to order to meet the special tastes of the seriously rich. For him, surveillance by the New York Police Department and from the Mob underworld went with the territory. By now he had learned the techniques used by the watchers, and how best to frustrate them. First off he knew they never worked alone, and that they dressed to merge in with their surroundings, often buying hand-me-down clothes. Unlike Hollywood sleuths they generally followed from the opposite side of the street. That way they got a better view and were less likely to be spotted themselves by the target. Ducking in and out of shop doorways twenty paces behind was strictly for amateurs.

Special Agent Trent was no amateur, but it had been a long time since he had been on routine street surveillance squad duties. Pangalos, and where his trail of filth led, however, had become something of a fixation with him. It was personal as well as professional. Because of his wife. Pulling nervously at the peak of his baseball cap, he kept watch on the distinctive rolling gait of

the Greek over to his left, on the opposite sidewalk. Passers-by, if they noticed him at all, would have seen a thirtysomething, wiry man of medium height. A pleasant-looking guy-next-door type whose attractive, even features were marred only by a nose job, courtesy of a college football game.

Just a few minutes into the operation and his eyes ached from watching sideways and from the chill wind. They covered an uneventful block, heading towards the river, when the Greek paused by the subway at the junction with Eighth. Trent held his breath, but Pangalos walked across the busy road, past the Burger King. Then, for the first time, it occurred to him that the Greek might be heading for the heliport at West 30th. The only eventuality he had not covered. Still, for now he carried on along 40th, leaving Trent on the right side feeling exposed against the long expanse of plain brick wall that forms the side of the Port Authority Bus Terminal. Then suddenly Pangalos stopped. He was by a right-angled shop window on the junction with Ninth, and had turned to use it as a vantage point to look around. A *very* surveillance-aware target.

Trent kept walking, eventually crossing Ninth, still moving anonymously with the flow of the people. 'Listen, all of you!' he hissed. 'Target stationary at 40th and Ninth. He's glassing. Larry go!' Then, in accordance with standard operating procedures, he repeated it all.

The FedEx van driver pulled over and let Larry out. Trent had been giving the driver – now on 39th Street – his location every junction to enable him to keep criss-crossing the one-way blocks to stay close. New York is a dream for street surveillance with its simple geometric street grids. Larry Engel cut up Eighth and on to 40th to become the rear footman, moving just fractionally faster than the pedestrian traffic flow until he established eye contact with the target.

'Got him.' Larry was wearing what looked like a personal stereo headset to pick up and transmit his messages. 'He's still heading towards the river. Wait . . . Shit! No. He's flagging down a cab to head back downtown. Repeat he's in a Yellow Cab, licence number 5J82 heading east on West 28th. It's a Ford. A "Carlton is Lowest" cigarette ad on top. Repeat 5J82.'

Again a surveillance-aware tactic, walking against the one-way three-lane traffic flow, then taking a cab away from the marooned foot watchers and any immediate vehicular support.

'Mike. Go. Go. Wheels – collect me. Now!' spat Trent.

The Domino Pizza delivery man – Mike – accelerated to Ninth made two rights on to West 40th and gunned the Yamaha in search of the cab, checking for the roof ad and licence numbers.

'Contact!' he reported, just as the van collected Trent, and itself traversed a block in pursuit.

'Good, Mike. We're on your tail real soon. We'll maintain positions.'

Trent was mightily relieved, but did his best to hide it from the team. Pangalos had definitely been trying to flush out and lose any tail – bottlenecking – before heading for whatever was his real destination with that package. Two vehicles and a team of five was not ideal, but short of setting up blanket surveillance with operatives – some static – and five or more vehicles across a wide area, there was no real alternative. Legend had it that the New York office all-time surveillance record was sixty officers, used to monitor atomic secrets spy Judy Coplon. But armed with no more than an informed hunch, Trent had been lucky to get authorisation at all from the head of the surveillance squad. Anyway, blanket operations were always leaky. His chief had backed him, he knew – because the Bureau was desperately in need of a break on the gruesome Japanese murders. And because they all knew it was only a matter of time before the political pressure began to be felt – from both Washington and Tokyo. This had been the eighth consecutive night's watch, and he was going to abort after two more, afraid his hunch had been an embarrassing and expensive misjudgment. A very public Thanksgiving turkey for himself and his chief.

They were now on Fifth Avenue, heading towards the park. At last the brake lights of the cab flared immediately after turning right on to 56th, and Trent saw Pangalos paying the driver. The FedEx van followed, drove a safe distance past and then slowed. Its own brake lights had been removed and nobody saw Trent jump out as it stopped. In the excitement of the chase, he had not realised where they were. Suddenly his heart leapt. Trent grinned widely as he walked briskly towards the famous building, fighting the temptation to sprint. The Greek was going into the entrance to one of the most exclusive residential addresses in the USA. Trump Tower. His hunch *was* right. Surely. It couldn't be a coincidence.

If the Greek was supplying the filth tailor-made for the very rich,

then they did not come any richer than the owners of big, high apartments in Trump Tower. There are 264 residences in all, from the thirtieth floor up to the sixty-eighth, including Donald Trump's own fifty-room triplex. Unimpeachable owners were rumoured to include Johnny Carson, Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber, Steven Spielberg and Sylvester Stallone – along with embassies and international business tycoons. The residential address is 721 Fifth Avenue, but the gold-metal canopied entrance to the apartments is actually on 56th Street, round the corner from the public six-storey retail atrium entrance directly on to Fifth. Trent watched as Pangalos talked his way in, past the doorman, and then waited, biting back his impatience.

Ten minutes later the Greek emerged, apparently without the bag. He hailed a cab, and Trent knew he could rely on his team to continue the tail, having kept them fully briefed on the situation. He was going to stay behind and press on with investigations.

The elegantly uniformed doorman looked dubiously at his baseball cap, blouson, jeans and trainers. 'Public entrance on Fifth,' he said firmly.

'I need to talk to someone about a resident.'

'Come back tomorrow. Nine through five.' The man was well used to tourists and celebrity-watchers trying to talk their way in. It needed Trent's badge, pinned inside its case, to make progress.

'Go ahead. To the desk,' he said at last, looking at him properly for the first time. He walked him over to the hotel-style reception desk on the right, in the plush red, mirrored entrance hall.

The doorman whispered something briefly to the senior-looking man before resuming his station at the door. 'What can we do for you, Officer?' the concierge asked in a loquacious Philadelphian accent. Trouble at Trump Tower was unheard of. Residents paid handsomely for discretion and security, and got it.

'The fat guy with the hat. The Greek. He just came in here. With a package. I need to know who it was for.' Trent felt self-conscious in his street clothes as elegant residents and guests came and went, some leaving messages with the attractive woman also on the desk.

'I'll need your folds again, sir. And I need to make a call.'

'Go ahead. But make it so I can hear you.'

The concierge spoke to a senior supervisor in their security hierarchy, told him of Trent's request, gave his badge number

and a general description of him. There was a little banter, and then he hung up. 'We have to verify these things.'

'Sure. Wise move.' Trent was impressed, guessing they were checking that he had not shown soft creds – the kind issued fairly widely to Agency support employees, which look similar enough to those of field agents. Hoover had even given a set to Elvis Presley as a publicity stunt. And it was an established fact in all the world's security services that clerks are always making out to be agents, whilst real agents pretend to be clerks.

After a wait of just a couple of minutes the phone rang and the concierge spoke quietly into it. Then he put the handset down, having first switched it over on to a shout-box. 'Special Agent Trent. Trump Tower is always pleased to co-operate with the authorities. This *is* an official request you're making? In the parlance of my security colleague here, you *do* have creds?'

'It's official.'

'Very well. The Greek gentleman had a small package – like a book – for one of our residents. But he refused to leave it with us to deliver, insisting on someone coming down. The package was in fact collected on behalf of our resident by Miss Jane Field Miss Field is a close associate of our resident, and often stays here.'

'Has the Greek made similar deliveries over recent months?' Trent asked, holding his breath, praying for the right answer.

'Yes, he has.'

'How many?'

'To my own knowledge, four or five.'

'And you're on, what, half the time?'

'About that.'

Trent was feeling heady with elation after so many months of nothing going right on the case. 'I'll need the name of whoever replaces you on your shift. It's important for me to know if he can confirm a similar number of visits by the Greek.'

'Oh, but he *can*,' the concierge replied archly, twitching his aquiline nose. 'We've spoken about him. *Not* a Trump Tower person. Not at all.' The last two comments were made in a heavily mouthed whisper so as not to be picked up on the shout-box.

'Finally, I need you to confirm the identity of your resident – to whom the Greek delivered the package.' Trent already knew, but he needed to hear it.

'That would be Mr Sool.'

Yes. Yes! Trent shouted inwardly to himself. He felt like punching the air.

Emily Wilkins had the place to herself again. As usual she had been the first in, and would be the last to leave.

She looked from her office window out on to the dark, wet London evening, and then faced back to the harsh light of the open-plan work areas. They were empty save for the cleaners and the flicker of work-station screens carelessly left on by people who had long since gone home. The hum of printers and the small departmental photocopiers could be heard even above the whine of the vacuum cleaner. Did nobody else care? Did none of Chiasmus Communications' employees ever read her nagging E-mails about switching things off? Aside from the waste of energy and fire risks, if they did not log out of their terminals anyone could access their files, and those of their customers and contacts. So much for their cunningly thought-out six-letter passwords. So much for security. And here, in a computer company of all places.

'Hello, Miss Wilkins.' Molly Spink was the cleaning contractor's site supervisor for the building, but she also personally cleaned this, the senior management floor. A woman of Miss Wilkins's age – late fifties – she took pride in her work.

'How's your husband, Molly?' Miss Wilkins took an interest in anyone she respected.

'Not too good. Not too good at all.' Mr Spink had retired early from the Post Office with arthritis. Under new rules he had recently lost his disability benefits, and Molly's meagre income was all they had to supplement his state pension. 'Don't know what we'd do if I didn't have my little job here.'

'Oh, well. No fear of my lot ever cleaning up after themselves. You've a job for life here,' she said, and immediately wished she had bitten her tongue.

It had simply been a pleasantry, the kind of thing anyone might have said. But Emily Wilkins was not just anyone. She had worked at Chiasmus Communications for over twenty five years, the last fifteen as the chairman's secretary. As a result she knew everyone and everything. Including the fact that yet another savage round of redundancies was going to be announced the next day. The third in the fifteen months since Chiasmus – Britain's last independent computer manufacturer – had been taken over by SGT. Taken

over after a bitterly fought hostile bid, a business approach almost unheard of among the corporations of Korea and Japan. Over the last two years, however, Sool Kay-Sheen had suddenly turned into a rogue elephant on the world stage. He had been taking enormous corporate risks, reckless on occasions, and seemed to be actively courting controversy – making donations to Algerian, Libyan and Iraqi causes, as well as funding legal cases for veterans to reopen compensation claims for Japanese war atrocities. The latest rumour to surface was that he was trying to bankroll a star-studded movie from controversial director Oliver Stone, based on a harrowing book set in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp.

Against all this, a few hundred more redundancies, to add to the previous thousand at Chiasmus, would seem like small beer. But not to Miss Wilkins. She had been forced to watch as the company she loved was asset-stripped. Its people were being discarded, like unwanted bits of a donor cadaver after the feeding frenzy of spare-part surgeons. Surgeons greedy for fresh eyes and organs, just as Sool's accountants were greedy for the high-margin, added-value morsels of Chiasmus. It had all become unbearable for her, and she stayed only in the hope that she might still, somehow, change things back to how they were before. It was, she knew, a dim hope getting dimmer.

Ten minutes later she was making her way to the Underground station at Victoria, buying a copy of the *Standard* from the kiosk by Carlisle Place. The parochial headline was about another oil company moving out of Victoria, out of London completely, and 'rightsizing' to reduce costs. Rightsizing, downsizing, delayering, vocational relocation, involuntary separation, workforce imbalance correction, re-engineering . . . This was the hackneyed, sanitised business-school-speak used to describe and justify the relentless labour-shedding that was still taking place. No less offensive was the word they used for those who remained behind – the guilt-ridden, cowed survivors were called saves.

In reality, she thought bitterly, all it usually meant was a handful of secure fat cats sacking the vulnerable for short-term gain. Fat cats with three-year rolling contracts and share options. Fat cats still telling the thin to tighten *their* belts and braces.

Waiting on the platform for the Victoria Line tube to Islington, she seemed like any one of the bespectacled, grey-haired, twin-set-and-pearls spinsters seen everywhere pulling wheeled wicker shopping

baskets in the street, or sitting behind accusingly neat desks. Reliable women with few personal ties, there to be put upon and taken entirely for granted. Marginalised women the feminist movement forgot. Pigeon-holed women whose priggish views on everything were taken as read. Blue-rinsed gargoyles adorning every corporate edifice, scowling silently at change.

The train, already full, pulled in at last and the crush on the platform forced its way in, sweeping Miss Wilkins along with it. A late-middle-aged man in pinstripes, sitting in front of her, looked up from his paper and took her in.

'Would you care to sit down, madam?' he asked, giving her a patronising half-smile. His ramrod back and bearing were surely ex-military.

Pompous old fool, she thought. If only they knew the real me, what I really think, what I'm capable of. Sometimes she wanted to scream it. But instead, as always in public, she stuck to her cover and played back to them exactly what they expected. Come the day someone really crossed her, however . . . Come that day and the world would see the highly intelligent, angry and determined woman simmering behind the façade.

That day was not today, however, and she simply looked back coldly at the man. 'How kind. Thank you,' she replied evenly, sitting down and locking her hands tightly over the sensible black leather handbag on her lap.

2

The best place to stay in Las Vegas is the collection of suites known simply as the Villas. Part of the Mirage hotel complex, the suites are numbered from one to ten, although in fact there are only eight. In some parts of Asia, from where many of the guests came, the numbers four and five indicate bad luck. Hardly the thing in the gambling capital of the world. Rumour has it that each suite cost $3 million to build and furnish. They are the quality jewels in the crown of billion-dollar investment that takes in the Mirage and its sister hotel, Treasure Island.

Sool Kay-Sheen had adopted the routine of making a visit to Las Vegas every two to three months, having taken up serious gambling less than two years earlier. Soon after the trauma of the visit by his aunt. Gambling, like so many other things, had signalled the dramatic change in his personality that had taken place since he had read the terrible contents of that letter. Everyone had seen the change, witnessed the paranoid swings of mood. Everyone knew that something inside this powerful man had snapped. Everyone. His directors and staff. His fellow *chaebol* presidents. The Korean

Prime Minister, politicians and top civil servants. His now estranged wife and two daughters. The media. They all knew that Sool had changed. None knew by how much, however. And certainly, none knew why.

On his visits he alternated between the four suites that had three bedrooms. With each suite came superb service, including a butler, world-class cuisine and wines, a fully stocked bar, use of the hotel's limousines and private jets and – for very special guests – the chance of an invitation to play at the legendary golf club, the Mirage's Shadow Creek. Sool was one of the inner circle of big rollers whom Las Vegas hoteliers like to keep loyal to them. It was not hard to see why. He had lost over $10 million in less than two years, and that was net of his $4 million winnings.

The vice-president of public relations at the Mirage had been kept informed of Sool's arrival time by the limousine driver, and was there to meet him personally. Bowing, he welcomed Sool with one of a handful of Korean phrases he had taken the trouble to learn, like the professional he was. This always pleased Sool. It was an example of why the Villas was so special. Most Americans mistook Koreans – and Chinese and Taiwanese come to that – for Japanese. And anyone mistaking Sool Kay-Sheen for a Japanese would be committing a very serious error indeed.

'Good to be back,' Sool said, the formalities over. He had an impeccable East Coast accent, picked up from a year at Harvard.

The suites are reached through a private entrance off the hotel casino. It opens on to a marble passageway, perhaps 150 yards long, ornately decorated in European stately home style with pink patterned rugs over marble, pink-hued walls set off by intricate plasterwork, cornices and crystal chandeliers.

'We have you in the Lanais Villa for this visit,' the hotel PR said as they walked together.

'Fine. Is Miss Field here yet?'

'She arrived two hours ago.'

Sool nodded, walked a little quicker and smoothed his thin jet-black hair. He was tall for a Korean, with a round bland face that could light up disarmingly when he smiled. And he often did, knowing the impact that it had on others. Large spectacles framed and magnified his intelligent, restless eyes. His impeccably cut cream silk suit hinted at the powerful, tight body of a man who regularly worked out. Squash and racketball

to diffuse his aggression, and golf to teach him patience and humility.

'Tell them to bring my bags along in two hours,' Sool said to the PR before they parted. With that he went into the cheerful day room, with its brightly coloured modern furnishings, the light streaming from the french doors She was not there. Nor in the adjoining library. Moving back to the foyer, he went into the château-styled master suite. There were discarded clothes, bags, shoes . . . Evidence of her was everywhere, but she was not in the bedroom, or out by the open doors to the garden. She was not in her bathroom, or its Whirlpool . . .

'Hurry up. I might catch cold.'

Her husky, confident voice came from the man's bathroom. He went in and smiled. Jane Field was standing naked by the shower door. She looked fabulous and knew it. Twenty-seven, tall, long athletic legs, an all-over tan, firm breasts, her naturally blonde hair hidden in the knotted white towel . . . and the extraordinary turquoise eyes, the full mouth and beautiful face that had made her one of the world's best known models of the past five years.

'You don't bow to me any more,' he chided, still smiling. 'You are a dishonourable woman.'

She was absent-mindedly fingering the hand-carved guilloche motif in the crystal glass of the steam shower. 'You kiss my ass, Chairman Sool, and I'll kiss yours,' she replied, in the tone of an equal.

'Miss Wilkins. A minute, please.'

David Mann, Chiasmus Communications' pushy young managing director, was exhausted, and looked it. He had spent the day announcing the latest restructuring and redundancies demanded by his Korean masters, who six months earlier had promoted him. Four hundred additional jobs had gone. There had been the calls to key customers to reassure them in advance. Then the satellite broadcast to talk directly and simultaneously to all the staff at their three locations. The hardest part had been breaking the news to old friends and colleagues in senior management who also had to go. Lastly there had been the calls to the weekly computer trade press and to the *Financial Times*, to amplify the terse press release. As usual they were deliberately timing the external announcement of bad company news for late on a Friday afternoon. Late for the

weekly trades to do much with, late for the Saturday nationals – which in any case were the least read for business news – and even late for the Sundays for anything other than a really big and exclusive news story.

'How's it all gone?' she asked, following him to his office.

'Push the door to, would you?' he replied, sitting down behind the huge Victorian partner's desk, incongruous in the modern building. He had bought the antique in a misguided attempt to lend himself some gravitas, but it succeeded only in dwarfing him. 'Oh, it's all gone well enough, I suppose. The staff association has had to swallow it. Again. They've got no negotiating base with SGT and they know it. And we've been moderately generous with redundancy payments.'

'What about the customers?' The new, leaner structure was being presented to them as being all about getting closer to customers. Chiasmus had traditionally sold its computers and services through a number of channels – a commissioned sales force, a catalogue direct-sell operation aimed at small and medium-sized companies, value-added resellers, VARs, who also sell competitors' products, and through a key account sales team which acted as a single point of contact for main customers, be it for Chiasmus's mainframes, midi-systems, PCs and work stations, systems integration, facilities management or consultancy services. All this was further complicated by a sales team based on specific industry sectors, like defence, and yet another structured around international territories.

'The customers took it well enough. I mean, they knew our channels to market were all over the place. But a few made it clear they want an end very soon to all the changes we're throwing at them.' Since the takeover, Chiasmus's semi-conductor development and manufacturing had been merged with those of SGT in Livingstone, Scotland's 'silicon glen'. 'Also, a lot of them are still going through similar restructurings in their own businesses.'

'And that's the point, you know. Don't blame yourself. Don't take it so hard. You're not the first MD to have to lay people off, and you certainly won't be the last. We're sure to hit bottom soon, and then we can bounce back.' She did not like the man, unable to forgive him when, as finance director during the takeover battle, he had proved weak and untrustworthy. His prize for that duplicity had been the forced early retirement of the old MD, the highly respected Jamie MacIntyre, and his own promotion as Sool's puppet. But she was

trying very hard to lay the ghost of all that, and to put the past behind them, in the interests of her beloved Chiasmus.

He smiled thinly and pushed his reclining seat back with his knee against the desk, linking his hands around the back of his neck. 'You're a bloody saint, do you know that?'

She blushed and looked away. 'People don't swear at saints,' she joked to ease her embarrassment.

'But you are. Really. Look how you've been helping Ian Lilley out.'

Lilley was a good name for Ian. He was lily-livered, timid and unassertive and had been made redundant from his position as Chiasmus's company secretary five months earlier. His duties had largely been outsourced by the Koreans to the corporation's solicitors. Outsourcing. That was yet another word they had used for sacking people. Somehow over the years, Ian's nerves had been shot. A man in his early fifties, with a wife seemingly always ill, losing his career had hit him very hard. At his age, and given his weak nature, he would never work again. It had all combined to drive him to a nervous breakdown, or something very like it. Although not that close a friend, Miss Wilkins had made the effort to stay in touch, and met him a few times to encourage him to talk.

'He's in a bit of a state,' she admitted, 'and still hasn't told his wife he's out of work. He drives off every morning at the usual time, only to spend his days job-hunting and killing time in libraries and snack bars. Then he comes home pretending it's been a hard day at the office. Every month he's putting the equivalent of his salary in their bank account from his redundancy pay. The trouble now is that he's got to give his car back next month, and that's really worrying him silly. How to explain it away.'

Mann leaned forward, his hands still locked together, now resting on the desk. He was frowning and avoiding her eyes. Miss Wilkins was good at body language and noticed the tell-tale signs 'Tell him he can keep the car,' he said. 'Tell him not to talk about it, but he can keep the thing.'

Miss Wilkins was genuinely moved. Somebody was doing the right thing at last. It really cheered her. Perhaps despite everything she really could slowly recreate something of the old paternal, caring Chiasmus. 'I will tell him. That's good of you, David. It'll buy him more time. Thank you.'

He stood up and paced over to the window, hands now clasped

behind his back. As well as reading body language, Miss Wilkins had always seemed able to help people open up. Empiric amateur psychology it might be, but it usually worked as a crude form of catharthis.

'I can see that all of this is upsetting you. We all know you're having to carry out Chairman Sool's latest orders. Everyone knows how authoritarian and eccentric the man is. Don't be so hard on yourself. Try not to let it get to you.'

Turning slowly, he looked at her with a pained expression. He was close to tears. 'You're not making this any easier,' he said quietly, almost to himself.

'Wha . . .?'

And then in an instant she knew. It hit her like a physical blow. A fierce electric jolt cracked in her head, a fist punched her stomach. Me. Me! ME! she screamed inwardly. They're sacking me!

She could see that he was still talking but could not hear a word. Blood coursed noisily through her ears and her vision seemed blurred. Sweat formed on her back, chest and brow, yet she felt cold, so very cold. A tremendous pent-up explosive power seemed to be brimming inside her, but she was as weak as a kitten.

Gradually she found she was listening again, hearing snatches. Something about the executive UK chairman's role changing to a few days a month as a token non-exec. Part of delayering. Blah. No real role now for a full-time chairman of a subsidiary. Blah. No need therefore for the chairman's outer office. Mr Park in Frankfurt would be getting more involved on a European basis. Blah. She'd have no trouble finding something else. Blah. The Koreans thought it best if she packed up and cleared her desk tonight. TONIGHT. Sure she'd understand. Blah. Generous redundancy package. Blah, blah . . .

Then suddenly, somehow, she was back in her office. Mann's room opposite was in darkness and the banshee howl of an industrial vacuum cleaner was growing louder and louder. Molly Spink came over, concerned as Miss Wilkins had uncharacteristically not acknowledged her usual wave of greeting. She found her ashen-faced, frowning and staring at her desk.

'Whatever's the matter?' Molly asked, worried. 'Miss Wilkins. Miss Wilkins, are you all right?'

Eventually Miss Wilkins looked up, gazing at Molly curiously. 'Would you bring me a coffee or something? With sugar. Plenty of

sugar. I've had a bit of a shock, you see,' she said in an eerily calm voice. A small voice that seemed to herself distant, as if someone else was speaking.

When Molly returned with the plastic cup, Miss Wilkins seemed a little less glazed, a little more herself. 'What on earth's happened? Can you tell me?' Molly thought it might have been news of a bereavement.

'Do you know how many years I have worked with Chiasmus?' Without waiting for Molly to answer, she went on. 'Twenty-six. And I've worked for three chairmen.' The latest, Lieutenant-General Sir Lucien Walters, had been her favourite. Well connected in the City, he had a string of other directorships, having cultivated a superficial business naïvety that the operational people and analysts liked. 'I'm only an old out-to-grass soldier, but I know how many beans make five.' That kind of thing. And when he was visiting a factory or customer he would talk about 'getting my knees brown'. But she knew this front belied a very sharp mind and an excellent strategic brain. Whilst David Mann had been duplicitous and half-hearted in resisting Sool, his eye firmly on his own interests, Sir Lucien had fought a superb campaign against SGT, losing only narrowly. He was still devastated that under his stewardship the last major British computer manufacturer had been taken over by the East – as ICL and Apricot had years earlier, in different circumstances, linking with Fujitsu and Mitsubishi.

Molly's quick mind had by now already guessed the unthinkable. 'They've not! Not you. Surely not you . . .'

'Oh yes. Why not? Me too. I've also been de-lay-ered.' She elongated the hated euphemism sarcastically.

Molly sat with her for a while, listening and being of what help she could. 'What will you do?'

'Well, as I told you last night, at least your job's safe. Perhaps I'll apply to you for a position.' Miss Wilkins smiled, still fighting to get a grip on herself and to keep her dignity.

'Any time. I'm always short of cleaners,' Molly gently joked. 'But seriously. What *will* you do? I mean, I know you haven't had any time to think yet, but . . .'

'I don't need any time to think. It's simple. I know exactly what I'm going to do,' Miss Wilkins said with a steel in her voice Molly had never heard before. 'I carry out twenty-six years of my life tonight in a cardboard box. After that, I'm going to devote all

my considerable energies to bringing down SGT. And its grinning Chairman Sool,' she said, her voice trembling. 'Just *imagine* what I know. Just imagine what I could do. *They* have, and that's why they don't want me here working out my notice. But they don't know me, Molly. Nobody really does. Not the real me. I can bring them crashing down. I can, and I will. Chairman Sool Kay-Sheen is going to know all about sweet old Emily Wilkins. That I promise you.'

A little over an hour later, Molly sadly watched Miss Wilkins struggling to the elevator carrying a large box of her things – personal files, photographs, desk toys, spare shoes and a raincoat. She watched her put down the box, walk back and turn off a printer – diligent to the end. Then, having taken a long last look at the scene of so much of her life, she was gone.

As she cleaned around Miss Wilkins's already soulless office later, she thought about that extraordinary threat. It should just have seemed like the empty ramblings of a rejected, bitter old woman. But that was not the Emily Wilkins she had come to know. She had been deadly serious. And she *did* know a lot. She had real power in her hands. What if a deeply disgruntled ex-employee really *did* decide to hit back? It was every multi-national's worst nightmare.

It is said that all great empires and personal fortunes are built on a crime. No organisation is without something to hide. And in Miss Wilkins, Chiasmus, SGT and Sool Kay-Sheen had just badly alienated the one person who knew everything and forgot nothing. Every organisation has a Miss Wilkins, and most have no idea of the knowledge and power they potentially possess. She was a human time-bomb.

'Mr Park. Welcome again,' said John Blake, bowing.

Park Chang-Hyun was difficult to age – maybe thirty – and was dressed in a well cut black suit that hung well, if funereally, on his tallish, fit-looking body. Like all SGT people, he always wore white shirts, but he asserted a little individuality with his habitual navy spotted silk bow tie. His features had a Western handsomeness and there was little of the Mongol about him, excepting his raven-black hair. Styled in a kind of longish crew cut, it had the texture of fake fur. His English and French were near faultless; he had completed his post-graduate business degree at INSEAD, Fontainebleau. The two men had been on a couple of serious drinking nights together and now got on well. In private they were on CH/John terms.

The Korean grinned and bowed to each of the other four Globecom team members he had met before. He was by far the most senior amongst a number of co-ordinators for SGT worldwide, and this meeting was intended to be the last hurdle before the PR contract was finally signed. Blake had a shrewd idea that Chairman Sool had already authorised the go-ahead, but it was important to let Park be seen to have ownership.

Ostensibly the purpose of the meeting was for Globecom to present the results of some additional research they had commissioned – again at their own expense – into business and economic trends in Japan, the USA and the EU. It was against these market dynamics that the chairman had announced his hugely ambitious plans for European market penetration, with targets that many felt impracticable. A corporate and product public relations campaign was badly needed, Globecom unsurprisingly concluded, if consumers, importers, dealers, governments and officialdom were to become familiar with the corporation and to trust its products and services.

Blake felt tired, but was an old enough pro to be able to hide it. He had reached the Frankfurt office by eight o'clock, after a fifteen-minute cab journey from the Steigenberger. The research results had been visualised and put on Powerpoint, a portable presentation computer system which could throw colour graphics on to a screen. Several sets of hard-copy printouts had also been bound for Park to take away. The technology had worked well enough in the rehearsal, looking high tech and professional. Deep down, however, Blake hated it, having witnessed too many cock-ups, technical and human. He still preferred to present from safe and simple acetates, but was smart enough to know that they were increasingly seen as coming from the PR stone age.

The presentation in the boardroom went well, with Park asking some perceptive questions. The Globecom team ducked and weaved as the meeting dragged on until mid-day. In order to break it up, Blake asked Park to lunch. Just the two of them. He knew that the man would not want to be asked directly about contracts or fees in front of the rest.

They walked several blocks to have soup and pasta at the Authors' Club on Bockenheimer Landstrasse. At the end of lunch they shook hands on the contract. Fees for the initial three months of $50,000 a month, with a total annual budget not to exceed $1.5 million.

'Welcome to the SGT family,' Park said, seriously.

'We are honoured to have the great SGT as a client,' Blake replied. 'You have my personal assurance that we will meet and then exceed your high expectations of us. On a personal level I thank you for your trust. We won't let you down.'

Park searched his face for any sign of falseness, but found none. Blake was either serious or the most accomplished salesman he had ever met. 'John,' he said. 'You must know that this appointment is because of you. Not all your bright young people. The real PR task will only now start to be revealed. It concerns Chairman Sool. Perhaps this is something you had already guessed?'

Blake knew what was coming. 'The chairman has certainly cultivated a – well – controversial image recently. It's a significant factor in how SGT is viewed. Especially for government contracts, public procurement. What caused the sudden change?'

Park shook his head and spoke in a low voice even though there was nobody within earshot. 'It is a great mystery. It began two years ago Some say it followed an unexpected visit from his aunt to our headquarters Nobody really knows. But following that short visit, Chairman Sool took a month away from the company. He disappeared alone to a mountain hideaway, and only kept in touch through electronic mail. When he came back he had changed. He started gambling. He left his wife. And started seeing glamorous Western women. Excuse me, please, but this was not his habit Also he was angry Always angry.' Park lowered his voice even further. 'He *hits* people and dishonours them. In meetings, in front of others. He has hit me.' The man looked close to tears at the memory of it 'But I deserved it. I worship the chairman. You must understand this. He is everything in my life. I do anything he asks. Anything And I think I am honoured to be his favourite. He trusts only me. With everything.'

'I understand, CH. And I thank you for telling me these things,' Blake replied, cautiously. 'You are right to. This is an important issue for the corporation. Chairman Sool *is* SGT. Whatever he says or does will always affect the corporation.'

'We have some bad problems,' Park went on, looking shamefaced. 'Our country's president has privately made known his displeasure with Chairman Sool. Action could be taken against us. We could be excluded from government contracts, for example. And the other *chaebol* chairmen are also angry at him They think he is

dishonouring Korea, and risking even greater restrictions on the *chaebol* by our government. There is a move to throw SGT out of the FKI – the Federation of Korean Industries, which represents the *chaebol*. His actions are already causing trouble for Korean exporters in the USA, Europe and Japan. He could lead to import quotas, tariffs – or both.'

Blake's well-tuned antennae were twitching. 'CH, this is leading up to something.'

'Chairman Sool likes you, John. He told me so when he authorised the contract.' Park was now in deadly earnest. 'You have his confidence. And only an outsider can help. We have spent much time – and I know much of Globecom's money – talking about the PR brief I gave you and others. I confess to you now that it was a phoney brief. My real reason for finding a top PR professional was to help Chairman Sool in a great adventure. That now is your real brief We have just shaken hands on a $1.5 million contract. But all I want is for you – you personally – to invest your time, get really close to the chairman, and become his confidant and adviser. You have to help us. You have to help him. And time is not on our side. I do not exaggerate when I say that what we are planning will lead to undreamed success, or threaten our very survival.'

Blake looked back at him, and breathed a silent obscenity.

3

Richard Trent was worried about the case. Worried that he had little beyond the Pangalos link to Sool. Worried that every additional day could mean another young death.

His unspoken worries were obvious to the experienced palms and fingers of Fuji, his wife. He was lying face down on the massage table they kept in the bedroom of their airy high-rise apartment almost, but not quite, in fashionable Riverdale. Fuji could easily have made her living as a masseuse. Instead her career had led her from college and into her first love, teaching socially maladjusted children with learning difficulties. She was now working with kids from problem families in the South Bronx district of New York City, young people from many ethnic backgrounds, and each with a hill to climb. It was physically tough, and frequently physically intimidating work. It was also often heart-breaking work, seeing children with real promise being held back by addict mothers, or by frustrated, violent fathers and 'uncles'. Yet the knowledge that she really helped maybe one in fifty with life skills and self-belief made it, for her, the best job on the planet.

'That's good,' Richard purred, as her two hands caterpillar-walked from the base of his spine and up his back. He knew her sequences now, and loved the anticipation. Next she would cat-stroke him, starting at his neck, alternating hands. Then there would be the feather touch, so light, smooth and rhythmical. Finally she would finish with her exquisite magic carpet, when she cupped her hands over the small of his back, holding them there, somehow drawing heat from him and then easing it back as she flattened the palms. Until at last the hands were very, very slowly lifted away. So slowly he never knew when it happened, only that it left him feeling inexplicably light, floating away on that magic carpet . . .

Fuji could feel the tension leaving him temporarily, and his heart-beat slowing. Soon he would be asleep – the greatest compliment anyone can pay a masseuse.

'Relax. No tomorrow. The moment's now. Now . . . That's where we live. Now . . . Now . . .' she whispered dreamily, hypnotically.

The long, ugly scar on his back reminded her yet again of the danger he faced almost daily as a federal agent. Five years earlier, three years before they had met, he had been badly beaten, knifed and left for dead during a drugs-related investigation on the West Coast As a native of Los Angeles, he was with the city's Bureau station working as an oriental specialist on the case, alongside the Los Angeles Police Department and the Asian Investigation Unit of the district attorney's office. News of the raid on a Tong gang had been leaked, and Trent had woken up in County-USC Medical Center in intensive care. When he finally walked out he had decided one thing: never again would he become embroiled in an operation involving several agencies, riddled with people on the take, and with no clear lines of command.

China, Hong Kong, Japan . . . these strange worlds had attracted Trent from an early age. It was the alien feel of the combined ancient and modern cultures that had drawn him. During college holidays he had travelled the length of the USA and much of Canada, and had been left only with an overriding feeling of familiarity wherever he had gone. It had all seemed the same, the main differences being only between city and country life. But on a three-month exchange programme as a UCLA student, he had explored Japan from his base in Tokyo. At last he had found somewhere that felt different, *was* different. It changed his life.

Also, there had been the girls. In Tokyo at the time, being

American had been attractive to young Japanese girls, who were beginning to assert a little rebelliousness within their families. It had been easy to take advantage of this. A couple of his friends certainly had. 'Yellow cabs' was the name they gave the impressionable teenagers they deflowered. But not Trent. He distanced himself from this and went native, respecting and learning as much as he could about Japanese culture and philosophy. Learning of the constant effort to make harmony prevail over confrontation. Learning the Confucian approach to a society of relationships based on trust, obligation and a commitment to loyal action on behalf of others. All so very different to the Western pursuit of personal achievement, restrained only by law and the prevailing ethics of the day.

Back home, however, he did find himself dating Orientals in Los Angeles – practising his excellent Japanese and passable Mandarin, enjoying their seriousness, innate spirituality, their love of order, and their loyalty. Fuji Makita, however, was a fourth-generation Japanese-American who spoke almost no Japanese, had never even visited the place, and prepared far better pasta than she did sushi. When, after seeing him for a couple of months, she discovered from friends that she was the latest in a long line of pretty oriental faces, she had been really mad at him. 'Occidentals only dating orientals is as racist as *never* dating orientals,' she had thundered indignantly. But they fell in love anyhow and had been married now for almost a year. Their relationship remained rock solid, underpinned by the Mahayanan Buddhism she had learned through him.

When at last she heard his rhythmic breathing she left him deep in sleep, went to the kitchen to wash her hands clean of the oils, and made herself coffee. Then she forced herself to confront her worst fears – the things that hid in the dark crevices of the mind, causing her a permanent, ill-defined anxiety. It was her own way of dealing with life's problems – in class and at home.

Because of his languages and knowledge of oriental cultures, it had been inevitable that Trent would gravitate towards this growing area of the Bureau's work. He had fast-tracked from agent to special agent on the back of his Asian specialism. For the past year, since their marriage, he had been assigned to investigating the murder of eight Japanese girls. All Japanese nationals visiting or studying in the USA. All from wealthy families. No ransom demands, however, had been received, no

communication at all made or attempted. This was not about money.

The FBI defines serial killings as three or more murders in separate as opposed to same-day incidents, and so far they had kept any link between the deaths out of the media. The very words – serial killings – are guaranteed to create panic and a political and media hothouse atmosphere that can get in the way of the slow painstaking work that in the end is normally what succeeds. Mercifully, if surprisingly, the Japanese Embassy had also been silent so far. The girls had disappeared from different parts of the country, and nobody had yet begun to talk about serial killing. But that was what everything pointed to. Each had been raped, comprehensively abused and then knifed in a way that suggested one thing, the sickening return of snuff porn – murders stage-managed and filmed for the ultimate in perversion Given the near-identical nature of the MO and the wounds, it had seemed like snuff porn filmed to order. And that meant big, big money. Then came the first breakthrough, and it confirmed their worst fears. As part of a routine vice raid, police in Fort Worth found a second-generation copy of a snuff porn video. After enhancement it proved clear enough. It was the second Japanese girl, originally reported missing in Seattle.

Fuji knew a lot about the case. They shared everything. She knew that Richard's obsession with it all was partly, probably largely, because of her. That until the killers were caught it could – however remote the odds – be her next. What really scared her was not any theoretical risk to herself, but the fact that it had made Richard less objective, and so less careful.

Yet she was morbidly drawn to the case, asking him about it every day. Without him ever knowing, she had even watched the video when one weekend he had brought a copy of it home in a box-file of papers on the investigation. He had gone out to see the Yankees play and she had been unable to resist the temptation, feeling that unless she watched it she would remain an outsider, never really understanding what was driving her husband.

It had begun like the handful of other hard-porn films she had seen, as a student at parties with immature boys labouring under the myth that the stuff made regular girls hot. But it soon became clear that the girl in this film was not faking her resistance. She had been spread-eagled on a bed, manacled, hands and feet. Fuji sobbed uncontrollably as she watched, numbed. Then the last two

minutes . . . She had prayed that it was all faked – faked screams, faked blood. But it was not The close-ups of those harrowing last moments captured and replayed the death of a young girl as if it was no more than some disputed football touchdown.

The young rapist and murderer looked Mexican. Richard had said he was probably a 'wet back' illegal immigrant. He looked high on something, drugged into oblivion. No less a victim himself. Each time the murderer had been different – different semen and DNA fingerprint. The Bureau was working on the assumption that each had also been killed afterwards and disposed of by the film-makers, their bodies, unlike the girls', which had all been dumped by busy roadsides, never found. This doubled the likely body count to sixteen.

Fuji had never really recovered from watching the video. There would now for ever be a part of her that was somehow desensitised and cold as stone. As soldiers must feel having witnessed the unspeakable. She was made dirty and sullied by the act of witness, with images and sounds that would never leave her. Pornography she now knew made less anyone who viewed it. It planed off one of the very few, very thin veneers of civilisation that distance humankind from its bestial roots, and reduced it to just so many hunks of meat

She did not know how, but she now knew why she needed to help Richard end the evil behind all this. Despite the fancy computers and the intelligence-gathering wizardry available, the Bureau could do no more than watch and raid suspected snuff porn production houses – mostly in Los Angeles, San Diego and the Mexican border towns – and watch and raid the handful of known middle-men like Pangalos. All they had to work on was the single pirate copy of the video that had turned up in Fort Worth. That lead had died, however, with the dealer. He had been shot in his home the day after his attorney got him out on bail. The video had never been intended for commercial circulation, beyond whoever commissioned it. Hence the rapid punishment once word in this tiny cottage industry had got round about the Fort Worth arrest. Richard was convinced that there had to be a single, hugely wealthy person bankrolling the tapes. Each would have cost perhaps $2 million, once the silence money to cover two killings had been paid.

He had told her excitedly earlier that night about the Pangalos lead pointing to Sool. As yet there was absolutely no sign of a

motive, and not a shred of evidence. He did not even know if the package the Greek delivered was a tape, let alone one of *the* tapes. Instinctively, however, they both knew they had found their man.

But why? What could possibly be his motive? Sure, the Koreans hated the Japanese. Everyone knew that. But this did not come even close to explaining why a previously respected head of a *chaebol* might suddenly have turned into a proxy serial killer. For it to make any sense at all, something must have happened to him. Something so devastating that it left him emotionally wounded and out of control. If they could find out what that was, Richard had said, they could establish motive – and stop the nightmare.

'Emily. It's me. Ian Lilley.'

Miss Wilkins was in the middle of kneading bread in her kitchen. She was a messy cook and had got flour everywhere – on the surfaces, in the drawers, on the floor.

'Ian. I was just thinking about you yesterday. How are things? Any luck yet?' she asked, cupping the telephone handset under her chin and wiping her hands on a kitchen towel.

'No. No luck,' he replied, sounding strained. 'Look. I hate to bother you any more than I have already, but I need a favour. Could you pop over and see me? This afternoon?'

She really did not feel like dragging herself out to Barnet. It was Saturday, and she had to do her shopping and washing for the week. But then she remembered that there was no need. Like Ian she now had her days to herself. And David Mann had agreed that Ian could keep his car. At least that would be some good news for him She decided to tell him when they met.

'Very well. I could make it at around three. All right?'

'That's fine, Emily. Thank you. I'll explain all then.'

Miss Wilkins had not slept the night before, the night when her orderly world came crashing down. Instead she had lain awake thinking about what to do. How to hit back at SGT and its grinning Chairman Sool. So now she baked bread to help soothe herself, as she often did when she needed to calm herself and think. It was ritualistic, and not something that could be rushed. The physical act of kneading also fuelled marvellously tactile images of fantasy necks being wrung. Her basic plan of action was now already clear in her mind. Without hanging up, she squinted into her notebook and dialled a number.

'Mrs Spink? Now here's a surprise. Emily Wilkins here.'

'Miss Wilkins . . .' Molly sounded shocked.

'I know it's Saturday and you'll be up to your ears. But could I you spare me ten minutes later today, if I popped round?'

'Call round here?' Molly replied, alarmed. She instinctively looked around her tiny sitting room, at her husband by the fire reading his paper.

'Just for ten minutes. Number thirty-six, isn't it? Eleven thirty all right?'

'Well, yes. But we're in such a mess.'

'Just for ten minutes. Don't make a fuss or anything over me. See you at half eleven. Bye.'

Molly Spink put the phone down, panic in her eyes, and immediately threw herself into making her already spotless flat shine, whilst carefully avoiding the exclusion zone around her grumpy husband. She'd have to nip out for some nice cakes and biscuits. Half eleven. Yes. She'd need to offer proper elevenses.

The 4500cc V8 engine thundered as the silver TVR Tuscan open race-car cleared Clark Curve and accelerated hard into Brabham Straight, the fastest part of the 1.2-mile Brands Hatch Indy circuit. It was a raw, difficult beast and a handful even for professional drivers. But Blake loved its huge power – 420 bhp to propel just 1800 pounds – and he grinned to himself in the full-face helmet, briefly reaching 135 mph past the pits before braking hard for Paddock Hill Bend. The ventilated disc brakes reined in the beast momentarily for the heel-and-toe change from fourth to third, and then the revs were wound up again to 6000, then 7000 hurtling into Druids. Keeping to the racing line, he turned slowly in, the front eighteen-inch slicks betraying a hint of power oversteer in the tight second-gear bend. A dab of opposite lock corrected that, then a very gentle exit, now fighting strong oversteer, and in to Graham Hill Bend. It was virtually flat out through Cooper Straight and Surtees, slamming past an incompetently driven Ferrari F40, before braking early, changing down through the Borg Warner box, a good line into Clearways and back to Clark Curve, powering on again down the straight.

He had a Hot Lap electronic time device in operation. An infrared beam set up on the pit wall sent information to an LCD receiver in the car. It showed him a sixth consecutive test lap of under 50 seconds.

Pretty damned good by most standards, but he would need to put in 48, 49-second laps to be really race competitive. He came into the pits next time round, and started playing with the brake bias knob in the cockpit before getting out and heaving off the helmet. 'Bit stiffer on the front!' he yelled, so that his mechanic could adjust the anti-roll bar and the weight of the springs for him. There would be time for a few more test laps before calling it a day.

Later, having changed out of his flame-resistant FIA race-suit and showered, he drank coffee with the young but brilliant Irishman who prepared his car. They were entering the twelve-race 1998 Tuscan Car Challenge, the first meeting scheduled for Oulton Park the following April. 'She's still not set up right,' Blake said, glowing with the exhilaration of the test session. 'But it's a lot better than last week. Well done.'

'There's a lot to do on her if we're going to be competitive.'

'Well, it'll have to be a learning season. I can't afford all the bells and whistles. If I can do well middle-field in our first year I'll be happy enough.' Racing, even in the somewhat subsidised single-marque challenge, was an expensive hobby. Blake was hoping Globecom might give him some sponsorship money, so they could use the races for client entertainment, but it still had not materialised.

'Good lap times.' The quiet Irishman was sparing with his praise, and meant it. The lap record was only 47.57.

'No traffic,' Blake replied modestly, pleased nonetheless.

He drove home in his company car, a TVR Griffith – the barely tamed road version of the race-prepared Tuscan. After a quick lunch of soup and a sandwich, his ears still humming with the howling engine noise of Brands, he decided to clean the rest of his cars. It was something he really enjoyed. Unlike his job it was physical, tiring work when done properly. Unlike his job it enabled him to see and touch the tangible results of his labour. Elbow grease instead of *éminence grise*, he thought wryly, and began rubbing in the hide food.

In addition to the Tuscan, there were four cars in his collection. The Griffith, which he would buy off the company at the end of the year, and what he thought was one of the most beautiful cars in the world, a scarlet 1971 Alfa Romeo 1.3-litre GT Junior, a rare GTA spec model. It was a timeless, affordable classic designed by the great Bertone. The third car was an even rarer 1953 Fiat 8V coupé, one

of only 114 made. Then there was his fun car. This was a 1956 two-stroke, 322cc Berkeley – a tiny ten-foot motorcycle-engined eccentric piece of British motoring history. From the front it looked in miniature exactly like the Jaguar E Type it preceded by five years and from the back it was John the Baptist to the AC Cobra by six years.

His beloved cars – or more precisely his triple-garage complex – were the main reason he now lived out in Kent, in the converted eighteenth-century barn close to Brands Hatch. On fine weekday evenings, if he could get away early enough from the office, and at weekends when there were no race meets, he would have the Tuscan trailered over to hone the car and his already formidable driving skills. Other times he would simply blast round aimlessly in the Griffith, just for the fun of it. Motor racing had even taken over from his beloved golf in its calls on his limited free time.

The phone rang in the house. Cursing himself for once again forgetting to bring out the portable, he sprinted into the kitchen and answered it.

'John. Sorry to call you at home. It's CH here.'

Blake had left Park late the previous afternoon in Frankfurt to fly back to Gatwick. 'CH. Good to hear from you.' He had already figured out that Park would have contacted Seoul after their meeting. Korea was nine hours ahead, so he would have been speaking to them in the early hours of that morning.

'It's beginning already. Like I told you,' Park went on, a little excitedly. 'When I called Seoul to inform them of my decision, my decision to appoint Globecom, they told me that Chairman Sool had left a message for me. I am to ask you to fly out to see him again. Immediately please.'

'How immediate? Today immediate? To Seoul?'

Park sucked air in through his teeth, making the distinctive hissing sound of a Korean who does not like something. 'To be there on Monday, please. Not to Seoul. To Las Vegas. Chairman Sool is there for a week. He wants to see you. That is OK, isn't it?'

A 'no' was not an answer Park could afford to go back with. 'Sure. Fax me the details on what, where and when and I'll be there by Monday. As a special favour to you. Send the fax to this same phone number.'

'Good. Thank you, John.' CH was obviously relieved. 'Have a good trip. Oh, sorry, but do you play golf?'

'Golf? Well, yes. I can still play off eight on a good day. Does he want me to bring my clubs?'

'No, no. Not necessary. What clubs do you use, please?'

'Hogan Apex irons. Taylor Made woods.'

'Hogan. Yes. Good. And, er, John. You know, don't you?'

'Sure. I'll lose. Narrowly. Don't worry. My golf with big-cheese clients could earn me an Oscar nomination!'

They both laughed, but when Blake hung up his smile vanished. Another weekend screwed up because of business. More lonely long-haul travel. At least he no longer had a wife, or at that moment any other emotional ties. Nobody to have to apologise to for his suitcase life. The only person he was screwing up now was himself.

Vegas. That would be via Los Angeles. If he could catch a flight that evening, given the time difference, he might at least have Sunday to himself in the city, and could hop over to Vegas early on Monday. That way he should arrive fairly fresh for whatever the great man had to throw at him.

Whatever it was, he was not going to be intimidated, or treated like a servant.

A day in L.A. might be fun. He had spent a couple of weeks there the previous year, staying at the Bonaventure. Did he still have the card of that girl from the Greater Los Angeles Convention Bureau? And if he did, had he got her home number? Donna something. Maybe it was in last year's pocket diary. Please. Please let it be there . . .

4

Number thirty-six was on the second floor of the Peabody Estate tenement block. It was in Millbank, where a long-established working-class community was marooned by the Tate Gallery and offices on the Thames Embankment, the jumble of Vauxhall Bridge Road and the expensive private houses around Vincent Square, Westminster School's cricket pitch. Molly had lived in the flat all her life. Her mother had died young giving birth to Arthur, and as a pre-war daughter, with a foot still in Edwardian tradition, Molly had sacrificed her personal life to fulfil her mother's domestic role for her dour, melancholy father, and to bring up Arthur and her younger sister, Cath. It had never really been a conscious choice; simply an obligation on someone whose nature could never have allowed her to put herself before family responsibilities.

Her father died when she was thirty-five. Arthur and Cath had married, and Molly – still a virgin – married Ken, the first man who took any interest in her. Fifteen years her elder, and a widower, he soon turned into her father as the moody, domineering bully she seemed born to serve. As a daughter she had become in many

respects a surrogate wife, and in a cruel irony, as a wife she had become a surrogate elder daughter.

But if she ever complained, it was to nobody on this earth – only, perhaps, as a devout Catholic, to someone more understanding at Mass each Sunday morning at nearby Westminster Cathedral.

She nervously opened the door to Miss Wilkins. 'Come in, please. Give me your coat, or you won't feel the benefit.'

Miss Wilkins was ushered into the small hallway and then steered into the second bedroom, which Molly used as a traditional parlour. Ken rarely came in there, preferring to sit in the kitchen in his armchair. 'Won't be a minute, love,' she called out. 'You OK?' She had filled his mug with strong tea and switched on the small TV. He did not reply, which meant 'yes' in their curious code. 'That's Ken. I won't bother him to say hello. He's not so good today.'

Miss Wilkins nodded her understanding and took a seat in the parlour. Looking around, she noted that it was cluttered with a three-piece suite that was a shade too big for the room, a mahogany sideboard full of ornaments, and a folded-down gate-leg dining table, its four matching chairs in each corner. Cluttered though it was, the place sparkled from regular polish, dusting and vacuuming.

'Molly, I want a favour from you,' Miss Wilkins said, a little abruptly.

Molly had not sat down. 'Oh. But let me fetch you some tea. It's all ready. You'll have some tea and cake?'

Miss Wilkins chided herself. Her calling round was quite an event for Molly. How rude of her to come in and blurt out what she wanted without any of the social niceties. 'I'd love a cup of tea,' she said. 'Need any help?'

When the elevenses arrived it was clear that Molly was serving on her best china, out specially for the occasion. 'Lovely almond slice. I've always had a sweet tooth. How about you?' Miss Wilkins said conversationally.

It was another ten minutes before she began to nudge the chatter round to her request. She had learned over tea much more about Molly's selfless life, and that money was a constant worry. Her father's gold hunter still occasionally found its way briefly to Sutton's, the pawnbroker at Victoria.

'And now, about this favour,' Molly said at last, to help Miss Wilkins out. 'I'd do anything for you, you know that.'

Yes, thought Miss Wilkins. Anything legal and morally correct,

that is. 'Well, you'll laugh – but you know when I joked the other night about me coming to you for a job? That's it. That's the favour. I really do want that job.'

Molly looked at her sharply: she was a shrewd woman and needed no signposts. 'You want to work with me at Chiasmus. As a cleaner?'

'You said you were always short of people.' Miss Wilkins could hear her own insincerity, jarring and incongruous between them. She also knew that Molly would understand perfectly. But would – could – she bring herself to agree?

Molly gave her an old-fashioned look, and was silent for a while, sipping her tea. It was crystal clear why Miss Wilkins wanted the job. As a cleaner she would have access to all the files, all the computers, from mid-evening through until morning. Like starlings, office cleaners are never noticed, but each night both steal silently into the city centre as the workers are moving out. Unseen armies of temporary occupation, with free access to any nook and cranny of any office building that interests them.

At last she spoke, not happy with what she was about to do, but once again unable to say no. 'I do have the authority to take on cleaners, on behalf of the contractors. So long as the job is done to the proper standard, that's all I need to know.'

Miss Wilkins avoided her eyes and nodded, feeling a little ashamed of herself for giving Molly a moral dilemma.

'I imagine you would like to be given your old floor?' Molly went on, putting an end to any possible doubt about what they were really discussing.

'Yes please.'

'When do you want to start?'

'As soon as possible. Monday night?'

The FBI, as a bureau of the US Justice Department, is charged with investigating violations of federal laws, except in connection with certain crimes such as counterfeiting and postal, customs and internal revenue violations. The individual murder enquiries for the eight girls were the prime responsibility of the relevant police departments where the bodies were found. The Bureau's involvement had been requested once the cross-state nature of the crimes had been recognised, along with the apparent targeting of foreign nationals. In these circumstances the Bureau could use its

wide powers of investigation under the Selective Training and Service Act

Trent's report on the Pangalos surveillance was sitting on his chief's desk in the FBI's downtown New York headquarters, the dark grey chequerboard Jacob J. Javits Federal Building at 26 Federal Plaza. New York is the Bureau's largest field office, with twelve hundred agents. The report made it clear he wanted the Greek in for questioning, and a search warrant.

The older man, the SAC – Special Agent in Charge – of Criminal Investigations, was looking out of his twenty seventh floor window at the elegant US Court House across Foley Square at the back of the building, away from the noisy rumble of Broadway. This area, a centre of American civil justice, sat uneasily, he felt, over land forming part of a five-acre burial ground for African slaves. The mass graveyard, with over twenty thousand bodies, closed in 1794, and its little-noticed, mean, postage-stamp patch of commemorative grass lay to the south side of the Federal building, behind symbolically high wire-net fencing.

'We don't have anything we can use,' he said, his back still turned. 'You've got nothing. He took a package to Trump Tower, gave it to someone – not to the Korean himself even – and then went home and ordered a pizza.'

'A Domino pizza,' Trent remarked, trying to keep it light He knew it was touch and go. 'But not from us.'

'So what do you hope to find?' The SAC now faced him, belligerently.

'He was given something in return for the package. We assume money. But who knows? And there could have been a note. More instructions. Also, we could find another copy of the video. Someone somewhere made a dupe of one before It could have been Pangalos.'

'Not likely. The Fort Worth guy got hit. Professionally. Someone – hell, maybe cheerleader Debbie herself – *did* Dallas. That sent a signal. We won't be finding any more of those things in circulation.'

Trent knew he was losing him But he desperately needed something to keep things moving, to shake the tree. 'I know, I know. It's just that it's about all I've got for five months' work.'

The chief could see how disappointed Trent was. He liked the man. 'You're OK . . . For a West Coast guy,' he sometimes joshed.

They had made up foursomes a few times for a meal. 'How's Fuji? Still wasting her time on those young bums? They'll all end up in the pen.'

'She's fine.'

'Do you talk to her about this case?'

'No.'

'You're a liar.'

'OK I plead the Fifth Amendment.'

'Look, I'll tell you what I can do. I'll talk to the NYPD and get them to carry out a routine vice raid on Pangalos. You tag along and ask all the questions you need. Meanwhile I'll get all there is on Sool. See who knows what I'll get back to you. Best I can do.'

Trent left his chief to his crowded day. The Japanese murders were just one of many cases in his heavy load, he realised. He also knew that it was not yet time for the Bureau to move on the Greek. An NYPD raid was all he had expected, and that was what he had got, as well as a full check on Sool Kay-Sheen. The Bureau's own file was fairly thin, covering just his entry and exit dates to and from the US, details of his businesses in the country, press comment on his recent eccentric behaviour – including his financial support for Iraq – and a report from their Las Vegas station concerning his gambling. There had also been a short section on his relationship with the world-famous supermodel, Jane Field. Fine as far as it all went. But he knew that a full report on the man was now being requested. That meant the CIA's computers at Langley, Virginia would be trawling their own vast databases, and those of Interpol and the British – SGT had a lot of interests in the UK – as well as requesting an update from the Agency's large South Korean station. It was as much as he could have hoped for, and he left buzzing with excitement Sool Kay-Sheen was firmly in his sights.

Miss Wilkins took the Underground to High Barnet and began the ten minute walk through the solid, if dull, suburb, past rows of substantial 1930s red-brick detached houses, along streets of semi-detached, black and white mock-Tudor homes, their neat gardens slumbering through the winter.

Ian Lilley's home was at the end of a cul-de-sac – quite a large house with a detached brick garage. As she walked up the short path to the front door, she could see a piece of paper taped to the letterbox. It simply said, 'Emily, go right in. Door's on the latch'.

Puzzled, she went in to the hall and called out, 'Ian! Mavis! It's me! Hello! Hello!' But there was nothing to be heard other than the tick of the grandmother clock by the hall stairs.

In the lounge she saw an envelope propped against Ian's pipe rack. She was starting to feel irritated by now. It was a long fag out to Barnet for her, and it really was too bad of them to leave messages in an empty house. Her name was on the envelope and she tore it open The script was in Ian's small, neat handwriting:

Emily, I couldn't think who else to turn to. Please try to understand. Mavis is at her sister's until about seven o'clock. I couldn't let her be the one to find me. She couldn't cope.
I'm in the garage.
God forgive me.
God bless you.
Ian.

She sat down heavily on the couch, her legs suddenly weak. And then, realising she had arrived about half an hour earlier than expected, she rushed outside. The car engine could just be heard, ticking over, and she pulled desperately at the up-and-over garage door. After a struggle, she finally swung it open and was hit by an invisible wall of warm carbon monoxide fumes. Without hesitation she ran in, opened the car door and caught Ian as he slumped sideways out of the passenger seat, the hose from the exhaust pipe falling from the window alongside him. Not yet thinking to switch off the engine, she somehow found the strength to grab him under the arms and drag him into the fresh air. A neighbour saw what was happening and raced over to help. Once he had switched off the ignition, he yelled that he was going to call an ambulance

Miss Wilkins had taken a couple of St John Ambulance Brigade first-aid courses and knew what needed doing.

'Ian! Ian! Talk to me! Ian! Speak! Ian! Ian!'

There was no response, so she put her cheek next to his and looked down to see if there was any chest movement, feeling for breath on her face. Nothing. Next she checked for a pulse, both fingers of her right hand on his wrist. Nothing again, so she tried at his neck. His colour and unmoving eyes told her it was too late, but she had to go on trying.

All the time she kept talking to him, shouting at him. She punched

the side of her clenched fist hard into the middle of his chest. There was a muffled crack as she broke one of his ribs, but that did not matter. Pushing his head back, and his jaw forward with her thumbs, she looked down his throat to check for obstructions or dentures. Then, kneeling, she filled her lungs and breathed deeply into his mouth, turned her head away, filled her lungs and did the same again. Once more she checked for a pulse – but still there was nothing.

Finding the base of his breastplate, she moved her palm two fingers' distance higher and, with both hands, did fifteen compressions, counting each out loud, before breathing twice into his mouth again and checking for a pulse. The neighbour was shouting to her that the ambulance was on its way, and did she need help? Shaking her head, she continued the cycle, exhausting herself physically and emotionally.

And then – on the fourth cycle – just when she was close to giving up, there it was. A pulse. She had got a pulse. At first she was not sure, fearing it was no more than her own pounding heart she had felt. But it was there. Elated, she sent the neighbour to fetch a blanket and waited with Ian for the ambulance. When the man returned, he had also brought a glass of brandy

'Drink it yourself,' she snapped 'Never let that stuff near someone in this condition.'

The ambulance arrived in less than ten minutes and Ian was rushed away, an oxygen mask over his colourless lips. The neighbour went with him, Miss Wilkins knowing it to be Ian's wish that she be the one to tell Mavis. But then it had also been Ian's wish to die, and suddenly, shockingly, she began to question what she had instinctively just done. Was she right to try to save a life its owner had so methodically tried to end?

It was now nearly five o'clock. Two long hours before Mavis was supposed to be back. She sat on the sofa in the dark room, not switching on the lights, trying to analyse her feelings. There was anger, real anger directed at Ian. Desperate or not, he had no right to do this. And no right, no right at all, to charge *her* with cleaning up his mess. Good old Miss Wilkins again Good old Emily. No life of her own She won't mind She's reliable.

But if she was angry at Ian, her feelings about the true cause of the whole sorry affair made that pale into insignificance. The grinning official portrait of Sool Kay-Sheen kept coming into her

mind. He was the real cause of this, and so much more. If she could have physically laid hands on him at that moment, she knew she would have been capable of killing him, without conscience and without pity. This hatred of the man had, she knew, gone beyond natural resentment and bitterness. Somehow she could feel all the emotional peaks she had missed in her life – the love of a man, giving birth, the shaping of young lives wholly dependent on her – all of this untapped reservoir was being channelled into a simple, single-minded mission. To humiliate and destroy that man. As he had destroyed her, and her world As in a love affair, or the joy of motherhood, she found the future and its possibilities exciting. At last she had a goal and a purpose in life. She had intimate little secrets special only to her, and known to no one else. In a way it *was* a kind of affair with Sool Kay-Sheen. She desired to know everything about him, she was jealous of others close to him, and she wanted absolutely no harm to come to him – except from her own anonymous hand.

The telephone rang and interrupted her brooding thoughts. Switching on a table lamp she glanced at her watch. Somehow it was six o'clock already. Perhaps it was Mavis. What should she say . .?

'Oh, look. Sorry. I mean, are you the lady I just left at Ian's? Sorry, I don't know your name.'

'You're the neighbour. How is he?'

There was a hesitation and immediately she knew.

The man started sobbing 'I'm sorry. We lost him. They did everything, but we lost him. And I didn't want you raising Mavis's hopes. Is she there yet? Do you want me to come over?'

'Are you married? Perhaps you and your wife could come round later, after I've told her. And perhaps you could make sure Mavis talks to her sister. I'm sure she'd come over to take care of her.'

She hung up, numb. There had been such a sense of exhilaration when she had felt that pulse. She had saved him. Now losing him again like this made it all worse. Much worse. For her. And, she swore, for Sool Kay-Sheen.

Blake was met at Las Vegas's McCarran International Airport by one of the Mirage's stretched limos. As with a Rolls-Royce, you enter rather than just get in the things, and Blake self-consciously entered, grateful for the darkened windows. The air-conditioning was fierce as he settled into the suite on wheels There was a small

TV, a chilled-drinks cabinet, crystal decanters and glasses, a thermos of coffee, and of course a telephone. The chauffeur was blocked from his view by a partition, and he began to imagine what kind of things had gone on in the back. He remarked on this to the driver when after the short drive north up Las Vegas Boulevard they got to the hotel. 'Man, this baby's seen more action than Ollie North!' the old man had grinned in reply, laughing at his own well-used joke. Twenty years earlier he used to say John Wayne, and ten years before that Alan Ladd or Jeff Chandler. Blake smiled back weakly, hoping that someone was as diligent at cleaning the limo's hide as he was that of his own cars.

He took in the dazzling white Golden Nugget, the downtown sister hotel to the Desert Inn. As a guest of Sool Kay-Sheen he was given full VIP treatment, and taken to his penthouse suite in the Spa Tower. His black Samsonite suitcase looked cheap when it was brought up – Louis Vuitton would have seemed much more at home – and he had to insist that he did not need any help unpacking.

When at last he was alone he quickly explored the cavernous suite. The bedrooms were up a spiral staircase and the emptiness of the exotic master room seemed to challenge him not to sleep alone. How he wished now that he had talked Donna into coming with him. He *had* found her number and they had laughed, dined and loved last night as if the year's separation had never happened. Blake had once found the sexual directness of American women off-putting, but now he better understood the very real difference between their positive can do attitude to life, and cheap promiscuity.

He went back downstairs to the fresh, bright floral designs of the living room, lit through its floor-to-ceiling windows, and called his London secretary's voicemail to tell her where he was and why, and to cancel the rest of his week's appointments. He had just hung up when the phone rang.

Her voice was low and unintentionally sexy. 'Mr Blake? My name's Jane Field I'm a colleague of Mr Sool.'

Colleague. And not Chairman Sool? She was no SGT employee, that was clear. Then the name registered. She was Sool's society-column mistress. His Western trophy woman. 'Hallo. Yes. I've just arrived.'

'Mr Sool would like to see you this afternoon. At the golf club. We understand you play.'

'Fine. Yes, as I told Mr Park, I do play.'

'A car will collect you at two o'clock.'

'Great. Where? I mean, I don't suppose one of my golfing fantasies is going to come true, is it?' he asked.

She laughed, perhaps intentionally sexy this time. 'Yes, Mr Blake. You're going to play Shadow Creek. Enjoy.'

When he had hung up he punched the air. Yes! The Shadow Creek course cost – on some estimates – $40 million to create, and it is without question the most exclusive golf club in the world. It makes Augusta seem like a municipal. Only the biggest, highest rollers who stay at the Villas, and close personal friends of the Mirage's top honchos, have any hope of playing there. At Shadow Creek, two or three rounds make it a busy day at the course

From a cold English morning cleaning cars, to Donna . . . and now this, in just two days. Crazy though it seemed to him so much of the time, life in the fast lane sometimes had its compensations. It was just such a pity that he was going to have to play to lose that afternoon.

5

Peregrine Mitchell was counting the days to his retirement and pension. Just under six months to go to his fifty-fifth birthday, and then he was out. Out five years early because the Secret Intelligence Service, MI6, knew the pressure under which some of its people worked. Especially ex-field operatives, and especially swimmers – as the KGB had always nicely put it, he thought – agents who had been on long-term assignments living abroad.

Early retirement was not just a thoughtful gesture from a caring employer, however. The service was looking for volunteers in order to cut its costs, in line with the rest of Whitehall and in response to the so-called peace dividend. The Secret Service, MI5, almost directly opposite over the Thames, was being hit even harder, their communist- and union-monitoring greatly reduced in the new order, and their presence in Northern Ireland well below the peak of the 1980s. Its last director-general had made herself unpopular with some senior police officers by successfully acquiring a strategic and operational role for her service in combatting the drug barons and other

serious crime. But in both services numbers, like morale, were in free-fall.

It all made old hands like Mitchell deeply uneasy For a long time there had certainly been a desperate need to improve efficiency and management in the SIS. No one with the interests of the service at heart could possibly argue with that There had always been a mannered, dilettante approach to the poorly paid world of spying by the effete, private-incomed polymaths it had traditionally attracted. When Mitchell had joined as a middle-class red-brick, from a 'trade' background, the Oxbridge set had regularly snubbed him. In his very first week back in 1958, just to make their point, two of them had asked him out to lunch at the Oxford and Cambridge on Pall Mall, and then conversed together throughout the meal in Latin. The only Latin Mitchell knew was his grammar school motto, *dextram dare*, give the right hand. It was a sentiment that served him well as his abilities were rapidly recognised, and he left the old school behind to rot in their bile and Burgundy. Despite these types, who had now all but gone under pressure from performance appraisals and the Intelligence and Security Committee, Mitchell knew in his bones that it was far too early for soft democracies like the UK to pig out on the peace dividend. As one of his former chiefs had famously said in a report to the Foreign Secretary, 'Don't bell the cat, there are still rats in the cellar'.

There were twelve unchecked E-mail messages on his Digital computer terminal when he logged back in after lunch from what he still insisted on calling the canteen. There had been a good old-fashioned Workers' Playtime canteen on top of the service's last building, specialising in such public-school delicacies as toad-in-the-hole and spotted dick. Here, in post-modernist nirvana, in the newish headquarters to the south of Vauxhall Bridge, they insisted on calling it a staff restaurant, and had conscience-pricking 'healthy option' menu choices. Once a week, however, some Cold War veteran in catering put on a Russian-sounding dish – steak tartar, caviar (actually lump-fish roe) and blinis, and the like. Mitchell always ordered it – chicken Kiev today – to help fan this tiny spark of fun in their superficially efficient new world.

One of the messages had an exclamation mark alongside it. Urgent. Moving the mouse to the appropriate line he tapped in to read it. The message, a request, intrigued him, and he re-read it more

carefully before picking up the phone and asking his administrative assistant to come in. When the service had moved from the old 1960s building, Century House, just down the river at Westminster Bridge Road, and into the £250 million Terry Farrell designed Legoland cream coloured palace, they had also scrapped the traditional role of secretaries. Everyone, up to the chief himself, was expected to direct-input their written work using their PC, and as far as possible to use E-mail instead of memos and letters. Peg, Mitchell's old secretary, was now therefore his admin assistant, and empowered, as the human resources people called it, to work alongside him and two other officers, helping them with agreed executive support services. She was extremely able and was flourishing in her new role, although, given his near-retirement, she continued conspiratorially to do his copy typing, dictation and diary.

'Langley are asking for everything we have on Sool Kay-Sheen,' he said, swivelling round to face her as she came in. As London liaison officer with the CIA, Mitchell and the Chief were the only people in SIS to have secure E-mail links with the American headquarters. One day they would agree real-time access to each other's databases . . . One day.

Peg, a middle-aged, always slightly untidy woman, raised her eyebrows. 'That's quite a coincidence And I know what you think about coincidences.'

'Quite. They're asking at the request of the FBI about possible links to vice and murder enquiries The victims are all young Japanese girls of good middle- and upper-class backgrounds.'

'Well, well That *could* tie in somehow with our Moscow station intelligence.'

The 'coincidence' had been a report just two days earlier from a Russian underworld source establishing that a known go-between for Sool Kay-Sheen had been looking to recruit a crack sabotage and assassination squad – ex-Nomenklatura operatives of the old state security apparatus. These were the ruthlessly efficient gangsters murdering scores of bankers and Western businessmen each year, usually in pursuit of their own Capone-like protection rackets, and sometimes as straight murder contracts for some third party. What someone like Sool was doing with such people had been exercising Mitchell for the past two days.

SIS had to date only screened Sool and SGT superficially. All they had needed to ensure was that grants by the Department of Trade

and Industry to get SGT to choose Britain as its main European manufacturing base, were going to a pukka organisation. Memories of the De Lorean car plant were still very much alive. Sool's recent eccentric support for oddball anti-Establishment causes was also on the files, but as yet the British at least were not taking any of that too seriously. He had just quietly fallen off the official Christmas card list, and – not that Sool had even noticed – invitations to the occasional British embassy cocktail party in Seoul had dried up. As ever, pragmatism ruled the day in British diplomacy. Despite the redundancies, SGT had over the past five years created over fifteen hundred direct jobs in high-unemployment areas of Wales and the North, and helped secure many others in supplier companies. Politically that bought a great deal of tolerance for the chairman's odd ideas.

'I need everything we've got on Mr Sool. And I'd like it on good old-fashioned paper. That white stuff made from trees.'

'I think we've still got some in the basement, for emergencies,' Peg smiled.

But Mitchell was now looking out of his window at the Thames, lost in thought. He did not like what little he knew of Sool Kay-Sheen, and that meant he would have to get to know a great deal more.

'Mr Blake?' It was that deep, sexy voice again. Blake was standing in the lobby waiting for his limo to arrive. He turned and faced her, completely unprepared for her stunning looks. 'You *are* John Blake?'

Composing himself rapidly, he muttered that yes, he was. 'But how did . . .'

'You're the only guy in the lobby carrying golf shoes,' she cut in, with a trace of condescension. 'I'm Jane Field. Come on. The car's outside.'

Las Vegas is full of women with drop-dead looks. Jane Field had those, and something more. There was the seemingly casual, but perfect choice of clothes – a kind of battle-green loose dress, with dark brown leather trimmings, sandals and bag. The gold Rolex, its bracelet set loose so it slid about, was her only jewellery. Then there was the poise and deportment of her tall, shapely body, honed from ballet school ('too *tall*, darling'), a short spell on the catwalk ('too *full*, sweetie') and her years since as a photographic model. Above all, it was the combination of the big, improbably turquoise eyes,

the obviously natural, straw-blonde hair, now tied back, the lightly tanned perfect complexion, and the large, expressive mouth, with its ready professional cover-girl smile. It was an unselfconscious beauty, one that needed no help from surgeons, bottles or jars. Naturalness. The one thing guaranteed to stand out in Las Vegas.

Sitting alongside her, Blake tried to engage her in conversation as they motored north through the desert. He had little success. Monosyllabic answers. No warmth. Not even the professional smile. She made him feel exactly what he was – the latest hired help on the make.

'Do you play?' he asked, giving it one last shot as they arrived at the tall, unmarked gate leading to Shadow Creek.

At last she looked directly at him, to see whether he had intended the question to hang heavy with cheap double meaning. The effect was extraordinary, and she knew it. She could stun most men, like rabbits caught in the headlights. It was intimidating, a demonstration of the power and independence that are concomitant with the freak nature of real beauty. A serendipitous power which the Greeks understood, but which modern man tries to exorcise by money and his control of the media, fashion and entertainment industries. Blake himself had dated a few stunning models with beauty approaching that of Jane, and understood these things better than most men. He knew how lonely some had been, and how ambivalent they were about their looks. Looks that either seemed to make men feel threatened or afraid to approach for fear of rejection, and which also seemed to make regular friendships with other women near impossible.

Satisfied that Blake was not coming on to her, she looked away and replied, 'I play other games.' Now it was her turn to let him wonder. 'You get out here. Mr Sool Kay-Sheen will be at the practice ground. I'm going back to town.'

Blake opened the door to leave, muttering his goodbyes. She had succeeded in unsettling him, leaving him feeling in some ill-defined way insecure and unimportant.

'Hey, Blake!' she called after him, her face framed in the open window. She held out his well-worn leather golf shoes between her thumb and forefinger, wrinkling her nose. He walked back and took them. 'You needn't have brought them, you know.'

'I know. But they're old, wrinkled and comfortable. A bit like me.'

'Sure.' There was a melting in the ice-maiden eyes, and the kind of look that said, 'You seem OK. Not just another regulation asshole.'

He noticed. 'Will I be seeing you again this week?' he asked, rapidly adding, 'With Mr Sool?'

'I guess,' she replied, and closed the window, leaving him staring at his own reflection in the opaque glass. Her car reversed, turned around and accelerated away, leaving a trail of dust in its wake.

Blake now felt elated, irrationally so at such a slight thaw. There was an attendant waiting for him in a golf cart that looked bigger and more powerful than the Berkeley. It had velvet seats and a fitted drinks cooler. A range of clubs was in the back holder, held in two hand-stitched, black leather, Hogan bags. As the young attendant expertly picked his way through the flamingoes, pheasants and swans that teemed all around them, he jerked his head backwards. 'New Hogan Apex irons, regular shafts, one through nine. A full set of matching wedges with different lofts to choose from. One through five Taylor Made woods to select. A choice of half a dozen putters. You'll want something light here. I brought plenty of gloves. As for balls, I have surlyn or balata, Hogan or Ultra. I hope that's all OK.'

'Perfect,' Blake replied, overwhelmed by the fantasy world he had just entered.

'Fine, sir. You choose the fourteen clubs you need for today when we get to the practice ground, and I'll have the rest packaged up for you.'

'Packaged up?' Blake asked, changing into his golf shoes.

'Sure. Mr Sool means you to keep everything back there. You need the changing room?'

Blake realised he had made a gaffe in course etiquette by changing his shoes in the buggie. 'No. But please drop my shoes and holdall in there for me to change later.'

Sool was on the driving range, hitting a bucket of brand-new balls, when Blake arrived. Hearing the buggie, he stopped, gave the club to his caddy, and came over, smiling. He was wearing all white – shoes, slacks and polo shirt – with even a Gary Player-style white cap. His eyes were hidden behind aviator Ray Bans, and a platinum Piaget sports watch glistened above the white glove on his left hand.

They bowed to each other, Blake more deeply and for an

important fraction longer. 'May I say, Chairman Sool, that all of us at Globecom are honoured to be working with SGT. We hope for a long and successful relationship – as family.'

Family, pain and renewal – these were the three words that were known to all SGT employees and suppliers. They formed the company ethos and were based on Sool's beliefs as its founder. Family was literally meant, in that everyone should experience the duties, responsibilities and love found in a large extended family. Pain because all success was rooted in forfeit and periods of discomfort. And renewal was intended to mean the constant need for innovation and renewal so as to stand out from the competition.

Sool beamed back. 'You came over at very short notice. I know this. It is good. Because I will want some of your personal expertise. Maybe I will want a lot of it sometimes.'

'I am honoured. Of course. May I know what you might need, so I can begin preparing myself?'

'Later, Mr Blake. Now we will enjoy ourselves. Golf is my passion.'

'Mine too.'

'You play off eight, I am told.'

'Yes. I used to be under five, but now I can't get out often enough.'

'Nor me. I play off fourteen,' Sool said, then took off his sunglasses and looked directly, if momentarily, into Blake's eyes. 'And Mr Blake. Hear this. It is customary for the employees and suppliers of Asian tycoons to lose deliberately at golf. To save the chairman face. Yes? You know this?'

Blake felt uncomfortable. 'I've heard of that,' he said non-committally.

'You will also have heard of the handicap system. It enables golfers of different standards to compete fairly against each other.' Blake nodded. 'Very well. In that case you will not under any circumstances even consider letting me win. I hope this is understood between us.'

'Yes. Absolutely.' Blake was for the first time seeing the hard side of Sool. But deep down he was still unsure whether the man really meant it or not. Was this something he felt he had to say to make him feel good, whilst still expecting, needing to win? What to do? He worried over the dilemma as he chose the fourteen clubs he was permitted to carry. Having hit a few practice balls,

he then tried to get the feel of the putting green. Finally he studied the course on the bright green scorecard his caddie gave him. Unusually, it had no course layout, just individual hole yardages, pars and stroke indices. The whole course was 7,158 yards – longish by damp, windy British standards, but no problem in the Nevada desert.

They were driven in their respective buggies to the first tee. No need here to worry about tee times, Blake's caddie confided. No one else was playing that day. Sool insisted that Blake, as his guest, take the honour, and he felt the tension beginning to mount as he placed his ball between the blue, yellow and white violets planted as tee markers. In the distance he could see water hazards, dyed brilliant blue, and knew that this was no ordinary course, and this no ordinary game of golf. Sool was using it to test him out, to see if he was right for whatever he had in mind.

'Mr Blake,' Sool said, just before Blake started his practice swing. 'Mr Park tells me you have a collection of cars that is very important to you.'

Blake remembered chatting about them once with CH. 'Yes. I have a few. They are like my children. I've repaired them and serviced them myself over many years. I know their every nut, bolt and bearing.'

'Well, let s make this game interesting, shall we? And make sure that we both really do fight hard to win. You will know that I now have a reputation as something of a gambler? Let us say, therefore, if you win, I will give you a personal cheque for the profit Globecom intends to make out of me over the next year. The total contract is for about $2 million, I think. You will make margins of, what, twenty per cent? So that makes it $400,000. If you win, Globecom makes its margins, and in addition I pay you personally $400,000. How is that?'

Blake was desperately trying to look cool, as if this kind of proposition was put to him every day. 'And if you win?'

'If I win, let us say Globecom works without margins in their first year with us. They perform their contract for $1,600,000. And you, you must also feel the pain you referred to in our company motto. You forfeit your car collection to me. It is agreed?' Sool thrust out his hand expectantly.

Blake's mind raced. There was something dangerously unstable about the man, almost a kind of death wish. But even Sool, surely,

could not afford to risk $400,000 on a single round of golf with a stranger. Then what of himself? Did he even have the authority to accept such a wager on behalf of Globecom? Yet if he refused he knew there would never be a contract with SGT. Could he keep the winnings if he *was* victorious? He stared down at the hand, then suddenly grasped it. Damn right he'd keep them. Suddenly he felt needled by the Korean. He wanted to beat him. He wanted it very badly. 'Strokeplay?'

'Strokeplay.'

As he stood over the ball, he tried to blot out the size of the wager and the very real risk he was running of losing his cars – cars that had an irrational importance to him way beyond their market value. But, as Sool surely knew it would, the bet immediately affected his game. The hole was some 450 yards with a wide, forgiving fairway. Yet Blake made the elementary error of lifting his head as he completed the downswing and sliced the ball way to the right. A real hacker's stroke.

Without comment, Sool teed up, took back his Yonex graphite driver and, with a textbook, orthodox swing, swept his ball into perfect position for a medium-iron second shot to the green. Their buggies went their separate ways. It was Blake to play first, out of the gentle rough – although the rough at Shadow Creek would flatter many a regular course's fairway. Wishing now that he had taken a five wood instead of a one iron, he took a five iron for extra loft, made reasonable distance, and left himself a full eight iron to the green in three.

Sool's second shot from the immaculate cushioned fairway pitched just short of the green, and rolled on to within ten feet of the pin. A birdie chance. Blake was facing the prospect of finding himself two down after the first hole. Checking the stroke index, he was relieved at least that Sool did not receive a handicap stroke on the hole. But he had twice now witnessed that graceful, safe, repeating swing, and grimly realised he was playing a cheat. That was the swing of a good single-figure handicap player, certainly not someone playing off fourteen. The fact was they were probably equal in terms of their real handicaps. If so, Blake now had to win – on a strange course – effectively by seven strokes. A very tall order, not helped by his poor start, and certainly not helped by the, for him, colossal wager.

Once he had completed his next shot he knew he had over-clubbed. The ball pitched up to the flag and overran across the back. He would be lucky to get down in three from there. Sool said nothing as he walked over the superb green and waited. Blake was in two minds as to whether to chip or run his next shot Running it was a safer bet until his finesse game was working, so he took a seven iron, held the club in his putting grip, and after a couple of practice strokes, played the shot. To his immense relief the ball came to rest just five feet from the hole. Sool just missed his birdie putt, but got down in regulation par.

Those five feet now looked like five yards to Blake. Never one to pace around and spend a lot of time lining up, he called on all his years' experience of sinking putts and trusted his technique not to fail him now. Head *absolutely* still, don't watch the ball after it moves, elbows tucked in, eye directly above the ball, accelerate through . . .

The ball dropped. Only one stroke down. Seventeen holes to go.

'Always a pleasure to help New York's finest,' Peter Pangalos sneered sarcastically at the team of officers, two uniformed, as they arrived for the raid on his store. 'Can I get you all coffees? Or bagels maybe?' It was three o'clock on Monday afternoon and the browsers had fled at the first sight of the police car.

'You can sit down and shut up. That's what you can do,' the young detective said, without malice. This was his second raid on the premises, and the department's sixth in recent years.

'You're new,' Pangalos said to Trent, still sneering, baiting them because he knew the store and his apartment were clean.

'I begged to be here. You're a legend, you know that?'

'Hey – listen here! West Coast. Los Angeles. Right? Great stuff out there. *Great* stuff. Hooray for Hollywood All that shit. Best porn in the world. Makes you proud to be American. Ain't that right, Off-ic-er?' Pangalos was making a jerk-off action with his right hand as he spoke.

Trent had seen too much sick pornography, and too many victims of it, in his L.A. days to put up with much more of this. 'Keep real quiet, scum!' he spat.

'Scum? Scum! Did you hear that? I don't have to take that from you, douchebag!'

The NYPD officer shot a warning glance at Trent. Pangalos noticed and realised there was something odd about their relationship. 'Who are you, anyway? You're not local. Show me your badge. I got rights. Show me your badge. Now.'

Trent looked over at the detective who nodded. Pangalos did have rights.

'I'm Special Agent Trent. FBI. Pleased to meet you, scum.'

'Bullshit. Show me your folds.'

Trent produced his FBI identification and watched Pangalos carefully as the man took in the situation. He went very quiet as he digested what it could mean.

The uniformed officers were already working through the back room, opening packing crates full of magazines and videos, a sample of which they were leaving on one side to take away for checking. Pangalos was watching Trent nervously now. 'There's nothing here you couldn't buy at Grand Central,' he whined. 'You'll find zilch.'

Trent waited for the detective to move into the back of the store with his men before slipping his gloved hand into his topcoat pocket and taking out a copy of the Fort Worth tape. He threw it to the Greek, who in reflex caught it, staring down in horror before Trent snatched it back and put it in a plastic evidence bag.

'What is that? What is it?' Pangalos demanded, knowing exactly what had just happened.

'Well, I can't be sure. But it could just be a copy of the latest Japanese blockbuster. Like one we found in Fort Worth Know what I mean?'

Pangalos's eyes widened in fear, and Trent's heart leapt. He was right. The Greek knew exactly what he was referring to; he knew all about the Japanese videos. There was still no evidence, but at least to his own professional satisfaction he knew Pangalos was involved, and that gave him a direct line to Sool Kay-Sheen. 'You planted that! Detective! You get in here. Now!' Pangalos looked like a dangerous, caged animal, ready to strike.

The detective returned and listened to the Greek's diatribe of accusations and abuse before taking Trent outside. Despite a task force designed to oil inter-agency relations, there was little love lost between the bigger police departments and the Bureau. 'What's going on?' he asked evenly. Nothing could shock or surprise him any more, on either side of the fence.

'All you need to know is that I found a tape, this tape, in there.

I need you to confirm what's on it, and that the cartridge has his prints on it. That'll be plenty to charge him with, believe me.'

'What are you trying to do, Trent?'

'You want to know? You really want to know? I'm desperate. I need a break. But don't ask me any more. Just watch the tape, then call me.'

'This is my raid. It's my ass on the line here. Pangalos has smart lawyers. He won't just roll over on something like this.'

'It's *my* ass, not yours. You and your men weren't even in the room. You're clean even if this does blow up in my face. But I need this break. Watch the tape. I want this scum off the streets before any more girls are ripped. I want it known that Pangalos is on a heavy charge. Heavy enough to make him talk. Talk for his life, or end up with a bullet in his face – like the other scum in Fort Worth.'

6

The security guard was a regular, and knew Miss Wilkins's face as well as his mother's. She needed to sign his book before going up to start her first stint as a cleaner, and she had serious first night nerves.

She had decided against disguising herself with a wig, or anything even more theatrical, on the basis that she would simply not be able to carry it off. Instead she was relying on different spectacles – the much darker and thicker frames of an old pair she still had from the 1970s – heavier make-up, especially around the eyes, and by generally dressing down in an old scarf, belted navy blue raincoat and thick support stockings.

Taking a deep breath, she walked straight up to him, dumped her shopping bag on his desk, and muttered about starting her first night with Molly Spink. As she was about to print and sign her name in the visitors' book she froze momentarily, just preventing herself from using her real name. Mind racing, she casually signed in as E. Johnson, the name of an old Oxford friend now also living in London with whom she had kept in touch. The guard barely lifted

his eyes from the evening newspaper, grunted, and with no more than a cursory glance, waved her in. Hugely relieved, she walked over to the elevators and immediately began to worry about some of the practicalities. Where did she put all the plastic bags from the wastepaper bins, where were the cleaning equipment and materials kept, where did she empty the vacuum cleaner?

When the lift doors opened on 'her' floor she saw with relief that Molly was there waiting for her. 'You'll need me to show you the ropes for tonight,' she smiled, amused at her outfit. 'You do look a duck. Come on, Mrs Mop. Let's put you to work.'

Miss Wilkins beamed back, but was already finding the experience of returning so soon unsettling. Feeling every inch the fraud and criminal she was about to become, she looked around to see who was still there, working late. It was gone seven thirty, and there were half a dozen people still at their desks, tapping into their PCs. She knew them all, and gave each a wide berth

By eight fifteen, however, they had all gone, leaving several PCs on, their screens still flickering, confirming that their users had not even logged out. She had by now been shown what to do by Molly, and was busy emptying bins. Her plan was to work purely on her cleaning duties that first night, to make sure she could meet Molly's exacting standards, and to time herself. So far, she had avoided going near her own office. That emotional hurdle would have to be jumped last of all.

Suddenly she heard a familiar voice bark, 'I'm on my way down. Bring the car round. I'm late.' She looked around and saw the light in the office go out, and the door opening.

David Mann, dressed in a black tie dinner suit, was bearing down on her, heading towards the lifts. She could not turn back down the corridor without looking suspicious. Now he was almost running towards her, just ten yards away. Her heart raced as she cursed her appalling luck. Mann stayed this late so infrequently, and to be found out, as now she surely must, on this the first night of her great adventure . . . It seemed so unfair.

Then he was directly in front of her, glowering. From somewhere she found a little more courage, and heard herself saying, 'Goodnight.'

Was it bravery or a kind of intuition? she later wondered. Would David Mann acknowledge, let alone speak to, a mere cleaner? He just bustled past, saying nothing and avoiding any eye contact To

people like him she was a lower form of life, and in those few seconds she began to understand a little of how it felt to be black in some countries or a street beggar in most. A rabbinical saying came back to her – 'If the rich could hire the poor to die for them, the poor would make a living.'

The incident served only to refuel her bitterness, and gave her fresh confidence to go into Mann's office. Switching on the light, she saw that he had been signing a deep stack of documents. A glance told her that they were the agency agreements for the forthcoming calendar year, setting out the terms of the trading relationships between Chiasmus and its dealers

Given all the recent changes in Chiasmus's marketing channels, there was great suspicion and unhappiness amongst the dealers about the company's sales network strategy The expert dealers – the VARs – provided their mostly small to medium-sized business customers with a full service. Their staff attended regular training sessions to keep up to date on Chiasmus's range, on top of which they 'added value' by giving their customers a consultancy service on what equipment and software best suited their needs, and how to make full use of all the features, as well as providing training sessions for customers' staff, and an on-going back-up service for maintenance, upgrades and any problems.

These dealers, many of whom had been with Chiasmus for decades, were all members of the CDA, the Chiasmus Dealer Association, a forum funded by the company to encourage them to air their ideas and grievances The last meeting of the CDA had, she knew, been fiery, with the dealer who chaired it, Mike Caplan, giving David Mann a real grilling on Chiasmus's dealer strategy since the SGT takeover. They feared that Chiasmus would substantially increase its direct business through catalogue selling to small and medium-sized enterprises – SMEs in the jargon. Caplan also accused Mann of being on the point of supplying the growing number of out-of-town computer superstores at far lower prices than those available to the VARs. Mann had simply lied his way out of it, denying that special terms were being offered to the superstore sheds. He felt confident in doing this, as he knew that the sheds would never divulge their trading terms to anyone. He well understood the crucial importance of the VARs to Chiasmus, however. Although accounting only for a third of sales volume, they contributed two-thirds of the company's profit, selling at

much higher margins than either direct catalogue sales or the cut-throat sheds.

Miss Wilkins looked through the letters and the accompanying individualised contracts, two copies of which had been signed by Mann so the dealers could sign both and return one to Chiasmus. When she came to Mike Caplan's letter, she unclipped the contracts and swapped his bottom copy with that being sent to the superstore chain, Computashop. Then she tidied the piles neatly, knowing that Mann's secretary would simply put them in their envelopes first thing next morning and post them off. Even if she did skim them to check the order, the top copies were still right.

The results of this, her first piece of mischief-making, would be immensely damaging for Chiasmus. 'King' Caplan, as he was known, would immediately call a special meeting of the CDA and leak all the information to the highly aggressive weekly computer trade press. If the CDA members decided to switch their customers from Chiasmus to other manufacturers, it would be ruinous. She also understood the anger of the VARs – risk-taking entrepreneurs, most of them with their homes on the line when business was tough, and people with little respect for what they saw as salaried desk jockeys who were paid even when their corporations made losses.

She left Mann's office elated, and set about finishing her night's work. It was almost eleven o'clock when, tired and aching, she felt she had at last done everything. Molly had already been up to see how she was getting on, and had been impressed. Miss Wilkins had felt a genuine surge of pride. She had her coat on and was on her way to the lift when she remembered one more thing she needed to do. She went back to her old desk, switched on her PC and logged in with her usual code and password. As she fully expected, nobody had bothered to invalidate them, and she was able to tap into the personnel department's records She had not been able to remember the young German's second name, and so had the computer perform a word search for Gerhard In seconds his file was found. Of course. Richter. Gerhard Richter. How could she have forgotten, after all the trouble he had caused. Scrolling through, she found his address and telephone number, and jotted them down. Having logged out, she went back to the lift, pleased with herself, and looked coldly at Chairman Sool's portrait by the lift.

'Goodnight, Chairman,' she said out loud. 'Family: Creation: Pain. Remember that. Pain. Your word, not mine.'

With a last look at him, she went home, tired but excited.

The game had left Blake physically and mentally shattered. Why on earth had he ever agreed to it?

He had, of course, lost. Lost the game, if only by two strokes, having played the best golf of his life. Lost his company $400,000. Lost his TVR, his Alfa Romeo, the vintage Fiat, and even his darling little Berkeley. For what? A rich man's whim. And to a cheat.

What he had not lost, however, was face. He had taken his losses like a man, and with courtesy. That was perhaps why Sool had asked him to dinner that evening, quite an honour for someone like himself, in a service capacity. Blake had thought about all this earlier as he washed away his anger in his Jacuzzi, whilst at the same time washing down the best part of a bottle of Krug. Later, as he made for the Lanais Villa at the Mirage, he realised he was a little drunk, and still pumped up after the game. His wise consultant's head was going to be needed. He really had to remember that he was working, on duty – however surreal the whole bizarre experience seemed.

A maid opened the door to him, showed him through the day room and on to the adjoining library. Blake had been unsure what to wear, and as usual in such situations fell back on his blazer, a military-looking tie, and a slightly eccentric yellow silk handkerchief casually stuffed in his top pocket. He was glad that he had been semi-formal when he saw Sool looking very dapper in a light grey suit, with dark bow tie. The Korean was sipping a Scotch, sitting in a leather club chair. Jane Field was standing by the media centre, looking through the selection of compact discs. She was wearing a loose-fitting Armani suit, in a darkish, dusky red. Blake thought she looked like a fabulous Christmas present waiting to be opened.

'Hi,' she said. 'I hear you had a tough afternoon.' It was not intended sarcastically. She seemed genuinely concerned.

Sool noticed this, and clearly did not like it. 'Mr Blake is a fine golfer. He will win many other games. As I will *lose* others. That is golf. Is it not?' He did not get up, or make any attempt to welcome Blake.

Blake sensed that Sool was expecting him to make some self-deprecating remark to defuse any lingering embarrassment. 'It was an experience of a lifetime. I will never forget it,' he replied. Sool took the comment to be respectful, grateful

even. Jane, however, noticed the irony, and the shadow of a threat.

She shot Blake a warning look. 'Maybe Mr Sool will give you the opportunity of some sort of return match,' she said, perhaps to plant the thought in Sool's mind. 'Now. How about a drink?'

He stayed on Krug, and after she had poured him a glass Sool brusquely told her to get out and leave them It was embarrassing to witness, and deeply humiliating for Jane in front of a guest. She flinched at his words, as if she had been struck. Avoiding Blake's eyes, she went to another room.

'I smoke too many cigarettes,' Sool said, oblivious of Blake's discomfort. 'Would you like one. Or a cigar?'

Blake decided on a cigar, and went over to the humidor to find something not too heavy or long before dinner. He picked a Dunhill Valverdes corona, and went through the cutting and lighting ritual before settling down facing Sool in a club chair.

There was a long pause before Sool spoke, unembarrassed. 'You will be curious about my relationship with Miss Field.' He held his hand up to stop Blake protesting otherwise. 'I have learned that everyone is, and it is important for you as my new public relations adviser to understand. People say she is my status possession. I know what is written and whispered. So I will tell you. Miss Field, Jane – I think in private we can all use first names – we met around eighteen months ago at a dinner party in New York. For very different reasons we had both suffered great traumas in our lives. Jane had given up photographic modelling, given up everything because of a drink problem. She is open about it. It is not a dark secret. It has all appeared in the gossip magazines.'

Blake was feeling uncomfortable hearing all this personal business. This was not the kind of PR he knew. He was no publicity agent, no spin doctor. 'I think I've read something about it. She lost the Chanel contract.'

'She resigned the Chanel contract, because of her problems,' Sool went on. 'What she saw in me was of course money. And the chance to travel in the fast lane again, but without all the pressures of life as a top model. But I think she also saw in me something else. We both needed help. And perhaps we both needed someone *to* help. This is not easy for me to talk about.'

'I understand. And your tragedy. May I ask?'

'It was – *is* – something intensely personal. I will never discuss

it.' There was a tremor of uncharacteristic emotion in the flat, monotone voice.

'Of course. Excuse me. But if it was something the media might get hold of, if it was something that could affect SGT, then I had to ask.'

'The media will never hear of it. Only two people know, one of them me – the other is part of me.'

Time to back off. 'If you say so We need not discuss it again.'

'So. For these reasons Jane and I became . . . companions,' Sool went on rapidly, anxious to change the subject. 'It is known that I have separated from my wife. Jane is my companion. But she is more than this to me. She is what Americans call streetwise. I have good languages. I studied in America for a year. I am a shrewd man. And because I am shrewd I know that there are times when my Asian background can make it difficult for me to read situations. No. Not situations. Read people. We Koreans either trust everyone or no one. And that is not good enough in today's complex world of business. Jane has become, if you like, my judge of Western people. And in the end, it's people you do business with, not corporations or governments.'

'I hope I pass the test,' Blake smiled.

Sool did not smile back. 'Yes, you did She decided on the short journey to Shadow Creek that you are honest and trustworthy. Like all the British, bad at accepting a role in service to others. But honest. Had she felt otherwise you would not be here tonight. Also your behaviour on the golf course was exemplary. My golf handicap is not fourteen. We both know that. It is nine, and you won our game. I was testing you, John. Your precious cars, your company's fees, are all safe. And when you advise me how you would like to receive it, I will pay you the $400,000 I owe you. You can relax tonight. You are not only an honest man, you are now a modestly wealthy one.'

Blake almost choked on his cigar, unable to believe his change of fortune. He stuttered his thanks, his mind racing

Sool continued, businesslike now. 'Now, we've established that you are honest. That you are financially comfortable, at least for a while. I hope you are also competent in your curious profession. I will want you to manage a press announcement very soon which will have a devastating impact on the world car market. Naturally, what I am to share with you is completely confidential. That is understood.'

'Of course.'

'Very well. You must be aware that every vehicle manufacturer of any scale is competing for the Chinese family car tender.'

'I do indeed. It's being described as the biggest contract in history,' Blake replied, glad they were back talking business and not agony aunt stuff. 'Mercedes, Porsche even, Ford, Fiat, Audi, GM, Mitsubishi, Kuruma, Daewoo, Toyota . . . all of them are chasing it.'

The contract was for the design and manufacture of a small car in co-operation with the Chinese government. It was to be the official 'people's car', with gigantic production runs. China's annual car production was currently some 250,000. By the year 2004 that was expected to have risen to over two million, and by 2010 to three and a half million But the planned new fully integrated manufacturing base, in effect a small city with its own electricity generation, workers' homes, hospitals, schools, steel mills, tyre factory and car assembly, was not only to supply China. India was another huge and growing market for the 95 per cent automated, twenty-four-hour production lines. The monster, once given life, would constantly be hungry for new orders to sate its voracious appetite for steel, glass, rubber and plastics.

'For some reason a rumour is out that Mercedes are front runners with their FCC model. They are talking openly about investing some £800 million in the project. It was the talk of the Beijing Family Car Congress. But it is nonsense. I have a source in Beijing, and can tell you that Kuruma Motors, Japan's third largest car manufacturer, will announce in three days' time that they have the contract. A heads of agreement signing ceremony will take place with the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Co-operation. The Japanese stock market and the yen will rise sharply at the news. It will be interpreted as a clear sign that Japan will not only maintain but develop still further its special trading relationship with China. As you know there has been serious political tension between them recently. The markets in Tokyo will boom with relief and anticipation.'

'I don't understand how SGT fits into all this,' Blake interrupted. 'You didn't even tender for the project, did you?'

'Unlike other manufacturers, we did not *announce* that we'd tendered. In fact, when asked we deny it. But our design *was* submitted, along with prototypes – both diesel and battery-powered.'

'I see. Please go on.'

'Two weeks later the Chinese government will announce irrec-
oncilable difficulties over the Kuruma Motors contract. It will be
abandoned in favour of SGT. I can predict this because we will
have offered a financial package they simply cannot refuse. That is
the announcement you must manage worldwide – and to maximum
effect. The Chinese must be seen to be dumping the Japanese for the
biggest contract in the world. I want the news to hit the Nikkei and
yen hard. You must burst the myth of Japanese industrial supremacy,
and of their special China relationship.'

Blake tried to digest the mass of information he had just heard.
In the end the Chinese decision would have come down to price,
and related deals on hard currency and swaps How could Sool
possibly be able to underwrite what must – in the early years at
least – be suicidal pricing?

Then he knew. It had to be . . .

'Derivatives,' he mouthed, almost to himself. 'My God, you're
betting the corporation.'

Sool beamed back, pleased and impressed by the lightning speed
with which Blake had figured things out. 'You're good,' he said. 'Yes.
As you say, I am betting my whole corporation. SGT Capital, my
commercial house, has already taken out huge stock index futures
contracts "betting", as you put it, that the Nikkei will rise sharply on
the first Kuruma news. And we will take even larger positions on
it falling sharply again two weeks later when the Chinese cancel
the contract and award it to me.'

Suddenly, Sool betting a few hundred thousand dollars on their
golf match, or dropping the occasional million or two in Las Vegas,
was put into sharp perspective. All of that was peanuts to the man.
Of no importance at all, other than as a minor amusement – in the
way others might have a flutter on a lottery with their small change.
The truth was that Sool had put a corporation capitalised at some $25
billion on the gaming table. More than that, he was betting it on the
back of derivatives – in the wrong hands the riskiest, most deadly
financial instruments the speculators had ever devised. Capable,
as Barings found, of bringing down the strongest of companies
virtually overnight. On the other hand, if things went to plan, he
would make a phenomenal killing, allowing him effectively to buy
the Chinese contract.

The risk was awesome. He realised that, whatever the astronomic
potential gains, Sool would need to plough them into China to fund

the terms of the contract. He could see why it would appeal to the Chinese. At the very least it would be a spectacularly good deal for the nation. Sool had given no indication as to whether or not any among the leadership knew about the way he was funding the tender price. But *if* they did, it presented the People's Republic with an additional sweet ideological irony. They would be playing the capitalist game in a way that would serve only to undermine it, along with the Western institutions that sought to enslave them. Institutions and Western political leaders who clamoured for reform, still bleated about June 1989 and Tiananmen Square, criticised their new non-democratic Hong Kong governance, and persistently tried to impose humiliating human rights sanctions on them.

But what was really there for SGT? It would severely damage the prestige of Japanese industry. Could that possibly be Sool's intention? Blake knew that the Koreans still hated the Japanese. But that surely could not be his main motivation. It made no sense.

What he did now know for sure, however, was that Sool was seriously unstable in some way. He had the kind of *parvenu*'s paranoia which Blake had seen in other very rich self-made men More seriously, however, he also seemed psychopathic. There had been flashes of the characteristic obsessiveness on the golf course. And in the chilling way he had just treated Jane. Something was secretly driving the man, and he was sure it must relate to the trauma he had refused to discuss. Whatever it was, it had profoundly affected him, and was now permeating everything in his life. Blake realised, grimly, that he would have to uncover this secret if he was really to help Sool in his make-or-break gambit. Otherwise, it would get in the way of rational decision-making, and render impossible the kind of trust and intuitive team approach needed on such intense, fast-moving projects.

Jane appeared at the door, a brave smile on her face. 'They're ready to serve,' she said, the earlier lightness in her voice extinguished.

Sool stubbed out his cigarette and stood up. 'You understand what I am doing. You understand it. But, what do you *think*?' He was clearly desperate for reassurance, and perhaps praise and flattery.

That was not Blake's style. Especially not after so much Krug Especially after the way he had spoken to Jane. 'I think . . . Well, let me say this. I just hope the Chinese read the script.'

7

Gerhard Richter let himself into his untidy, small flat in Earl's Court and shouted into the empty room, 'Talk to me!' He had rigged his answerphone with a voice print check. It took just a few seconds to recognise its master's speech sound and, as he grabbed a beer, it played back the single message.

The voice sounded a little strained, but then so did that of almost everyone the first time they called. His taped message was the menacing sound of Peter Lorre mouthing a sentence that in reality he had never said in his life. Richter had spliced together individual words he had found by trawling through no less than five of his movies. It said, in his characteristic creepy intonation, 'You have just two minutes left to live. Leave your last words after the tone. Choose them well . . .' The 'tone' itself was ten seconds of the massive, funereal diminished chord that ends The Beatles' 'Day in the Life' track on *Sergeant Pepper*.

It frightened most people off, but not Miss Wilkins. 'Gerhard. I *assume* it's you. This is Emily Wilkins. Remember me? From Chiasmus Communications. Look, I'd like a word with you. Nothing

to do with that little unpleasantness. Promise. Call me, would you, on 829 7624. All right? Bye.'

Miss Wilkins. For sure he remembered her. Everyone at Chiasmus knew who she was. But he had never really had many direct dealings with her. She was not involved when they sacked him. What the hell could she want? He ran his fat hand through his greasy, long hair. The deal had been that they would not put the police on to him, in return for his silence. Had they changed their minds after all this time? She had a reputation for being fair. If so, perhaps she was warning him. This needed thinking about.

As he sucked noisily on the beer can, he let his brilliant mind play over the limited intelligence he had at his disposal on the subject. Then he busied himself with what now passed for his money-making, rent-paying job.

Richter, just twenty-six, was a compulsive phone-freak hacker, as addicted to computer hacking as any heroin addict to the needle. His hippie parents, long since split up, had sent him in the early 1970s to a Rudolph Steiner school, to develop him as a whole, rounded individual. It had not been a success. He remained introverted, and, by the time personal computers hit Germany in the early '80s, was a bedroom hermit, glued to his simple children's games machine and already writing BASIC programs. His only reading was science fiction, programming manuals and computer magazines. The big break came when his guilt-ridden father came home one day with an old office Siemens PC that a friend's company was junking This was the real thing, not a toy, and had a significant memory. He could now create decent programs and tinker under the bonnet. The machine became his best friend. They were inseparable.

It was not long, however, before the two friends wanted to reach out and make contact with new friends This they did through an acoustic coupler modem. The world of bulletin boards opened up, and for this they needed a log-in name. He chose Rover, after the name of the meteorological balloons guarding The Village in his favourite TV series, *The Prisoner*.

For a lonely, fat, introverted adolescent this was seventh heaven. The next best thing to the space travel described in his beloved sci-fi. He could make contact with other mostly inferior life-forms out there through his telephone computer modem, and he could arrogantly display the sort of courage and aggression normal young people showed on sports fields Richter's weight and

the terror of his regular asthmatic attacks had closed that door to him. So instead of making the school soccer first team, the boy was breaking into commercial and governmental systems and rummaging around at will.

His lightning-quick mind and his slow, repulsive body had made him short-tempered and thin-skinned. It was an incident with an irate systems manager which transformed the already notorious Rover irrevocably from a harmless computer traveller into a dangerous criminal.

Early one morning his scanning program was auto-dialling number after number, on-line to a chemical company's computer over in Pittsburgh, crunching through endless permutations until the high-pitched modem tone was located, signalling access. Once in, he rummaged around and soon accidentally made contact with a systems manager already working on-line. Rover cheekily started a computer-screen conversation, simply passing the time of day. This had happened before in various companies, and previously others had expressed surprise on encountering a hacker but had left it at that. Not so this time. The manager became angry and abusive, calling Rover a coward and an amateur. Rover snapped, and decided to show his teeth. With a calm, cold fury he spent a couple of hours working up a small recursive program and sent it down the line for the Pittsburgh computer to execute.

The simple program made two copies of itself, each of which then made two more copies, each of which made two more copies . . . It took less than a minute for Rover to use up all the computer's power, and then to crash it.

Since then, leaving school and leaving Hamburg for its spiritual twin town, London, Richter's life and career had been predictable. Student bedsits, easily secured jobs with computer and software companies as a talented young programmer, and then the irresistible temptation to play, unauthorised, with their powerful machines. He was never very careful about his private programming, or even his hacking, and he had been fired regularly when, inevitably, he was caught. This is what had happened at Chiasmus, the biggest computer company for which he had worked. His hacking, when finally revealed, had been so widespread that it would have been acutely embarrassing and damaging to Chiasmus's reputation if it had leaked to the media. For this reason, he had been frog-marched off the premises before he could leave behind any viruses or

logic bombs, and told that charges would not be pressed if he kept quiet.

That had been a year ago. And now there was suddenly this call from Miss Wilkins. What to do? He had no real job at the moment, and was just working on his numbers scam. On balance, her call needed returning. The probability was a warning about something, or less likely, some positive news about a job. Either way it was logical to call.

'Miss Wilkins. This is Gerhard Richter. You called me.' His accent was German-American, with little modulation in the deep, strangulated voice of a young man trying to seem older.

'Good. Good. Hello. Yes, so you did remember me?'

'For sure.'

'Gerhard, I'll get to the point. I think I have a little job that might interest you. In computers. Are you working?'

'I am employing myself.'

'Well, could you spare any time for a project? It will all be evening work.'

'What is this work?'

'I'd rather talk about it face to face. Why don't you pop over and see me. Or I could come to you.'

Richter looked around his filthy bedsit, piled high with electronic gear and the cash-and-carry boxes of beer, coffee and pot noodles that made up his staple diet. 'I will come to you. Where is it, please?'

She gave him her Islington address. 'What about lunch tomorrow. All right? I'll cook something.'

'For sure.'

Chizuko Ito always stayed at the Essex House Hotel when she visited New York, and she always asked for a front room with a park view. It was a Japanese-owned hotel, and had Japanese-size baths and general fitments – to the mild irritation of non Asian customers – Japanese-speaking staff and good Japanese cuisine. As an economic research assistant with Sun Bank, she got to visit New York once a year for the annual management conference of the NAFTA region executive staff, and sometimes more frequently, depending on whether or not she could tag along with her boss, the bank's chief economic forecaster.

She was excited. Tonight was going to be special. It was the

penultimate evening before the formal dinner, and the bank was sponsoring a production of Puccini's *Madam Butterfly* at the Metropolitan Opera House. Despite the pantomime caricaturisation of the Japanese in the libretto and staging, the opera always deeply moved her – beyond tears, and into a kind of transference with Cio-Cio-San. Amanda Roocroft was starring, and Chizuko could hardly wait.

The simple black dress was perfect, and she examined herself carefully in the full-length mirror. Slim, long shiny raven hair, held up softly in combs to frame her face, and calm almond eyes. She was unworldly, coming from a strict, traditional family, but knew she was attractive to western and oriental men alike. Not yet twenty-five, she was thrilled with life. As a recent economics graduate, to have progressed so far, so quickly, and as a woman, was a credit to her talents – but she well knew that her father's influence, as a major industrial client of the bank, had also helped.

The phone rang. 'Miss Ito. This is reception. Your party is in the lobby. The limo is here, waiting.'

'Coming!' she replied, panic in her voice. Her watch read 6 45 She was convinced they had all agreed to meet at seven. The Lincoln Center was only five to ten minutes' drive. Racing out, she uncharacteristically left on all the room lights and fled down the corridor to the elevators. Once down at ground level, she almost ran down the marble hall that bisects the hotel, and into the bustling front lobby. A uniformed man was holding a card that read 'Sun Bank Party', and she rushed over to him, not wanting to keep everyone waiting.

'Sun Bank, miss? There's a limo for you,' the handsome young Hispanic said. 'They're waiting for you. The car's outside, to the right. Let me take you.'

The stretched limo had the usual blackened windows, and he led her towards it, through the crowd of other hotel guests waiting for the doorman to flag down cabs for them this windy, rainy evening. She climbed in, smiling, her eyes lowered, ready to apologise profusely to all her colleagues. But there was just one man in the back. Someone she had never seen before in her life. Before she could excuse herself for getting in the wrong car, he had grabbed her arm and was brutally pulling her inside. The door was slammed shut behind her, rock music began thundering, and in seconds the car was accelerating hard. They were a hundred

yards away from the hotel before she screamed, but it no longer mattered.

'What do you *want*?' she demanded, terrified. They had to be kidnappers, blackmailing the bank.

'Relax,' the big man said, his body odour and foul breath adding to her nausea and panic. 'Don't worry about a thing. You're a real lucky girl. You're going to star in a movie. A movie of your very own.'

'I think you ought to come off this case. You're too close to it. It's in your face the whole time.' Fuji had finished another rough day of her own. Every day with eighth grade ESN kids in the South Bronx was tough, but today the mother of one of her class had come into the school, doped up, and embarrassed him in front of everyone. He had just been getting his confidence up thanks to a year's painstaking efforts on Fuji's part. Then this had to happen, and everything was almost certainly wasted. She doubted he would ever even show up again.

Richard Trent could see she was on the edge and backed off from saying anything that could lead them into one of their very rare fights Each had hard working lives, and home had to be an island of peace if they were to keep sane. 'You're right. I'll try and figure something out.'

She knew he was deliberately backing off and that he had no intention of giving up the case. It earned him an unexpected light kiss on the cheek. 'Let's crack a bottle of wine,' she sighed. 'We both need it. You open it and I'll throw in a pizza.'

The Vino Nobile mellowed them and the pepperoni pizza hit the spot. As they relaxed later, listening to one of her favourite CDs, Beethoven's *Ghost Trio*, he confessed to her that he had planted the tape on Pangalos. He rarely bent the rules and was now nervous about what he had done. Nervous about having to swear to his chief, and later on oath in court, that he had found the thing in the shop. Nervous of the chain of events that his deliberate act of provocation could have already begun.

'Is there any way you can stop it, withdraw what you've done?' She too was scared.

'No way. Not now. The NYPD will have fingerprinted it already, and they'll have viewed the filth. It's out of my hands. I'm just a witness.'

He had done what he had done for all the right reasons, and

there was no going back. Fuji knew that Richard would come clean if events later proved this Greek innocent. At whatever cost to his career. What he needed right now was support, not more doubt. She also knew that he respected her judgment. 'There's a monster out there,' she said, holding him. 'You've all been chasing shadows for months and got nowhere. As more girls have been butchered. For all we know there could be another tonight as we sit here sipping wine.' She took his head in her hands and looked directly at him. 'You're risking a reprimand, the sack maybe, to try and save young lives. That seems like a pretty good trade to me. I'm a hundred per cent with you. Go for it.'

For the millionth time, he wondered what he had done to deserve her. He pulled her towards him, hugged her hard and smiled. 'I needed that,' he said, his confidence flooding back.

Blake had to get back to London to put together his team for the SGT China announcement two weeks later. He could have it co-ordinated from Globecom's New York office, but the financial team in London was stronger Despite the promise he had originally given to Sool about secrecy, he had now got him to agree that he needed to share the details on a need-to-know basis with his key Globecom colleagues, so they could prepare. Like merchant banks, top PR companies are used to handling highly sensitive inside information for clients – on mergers, acquisitions, rights issues, profit warnings, boardroom changes and the rest Ethically he was less happy about Sool's subsequent hint of some fix, some officials he was bribing in Beijing, but working internationally as he did – in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, South America, Russia and Eastern Europe – he knew it was nothing unusual. Something to watch, however, to guard Globecom's reputation, especially in the USA given the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act.

As he had left after dinner the night before, he had – wine-brave – found a snatched opportunity to ask the subdued Jane if she had any time to meet up with him before he flew out. Showing some defiance she had been terrific company for him over dinner, filling in the long gaps in the conversation with Sool. Once or twice she had attempted to get Sool to join in, even poking gentle fun at him, about his fondness for Korean food, especially the ubiquitous *kimchi* – spicy, fermented cabbage – and the hard-drinking habits of off-duty Korean businessmen. She had drunk only mineral water

all evening, for reasons he now understood. Sool, however, had still looked severe, and Blake worried about her being alone with him when he had gone. Several times he had sensed Jane looking at him, sensing that she was sending out some kind of signal. Sexual, social or business, he had no way of knowing, but with her beauty, it was impossible to ignore. He only hoped Sool had not also sensed it.

His empty playboy bedroom had sneered at him when he had returned alone, at a little after one o'clock. And as he woke at 6.30, his head ached, alcohol still coursing through him. In the sober morning light, he felt bad and foolish about what Jane could only have interpreted as the inevitable cheap pass. The sudden memory of his $400,000 windfall, however, quickly lifted him. His salary package was almost £100,000 a year, and he had made nearly half a million from the company's generous share option scheme in the mid-eighties, and from buying shares cheaply in 1991 when Globecom's price slumped in sympathy with the rest of the sector. Most of this had now gone on the divorce, the barn conversion, a small chalet in Zermatt, on the cars and dabbling in club motor racing. Sool's money, if he ever saw it, would be very, very welcome. There was no need for Globecom to know about it, he had decided In fact, when this SGT thing was over, he might take a couple of months' sabbatical . . .

The bell to his suite rang Damn! Had he ordered an early breakfast last night when he got in? It was all a bit foggy. For the life of him, he could not remember. Blearily pulling on a white hotel robe, he padded barefoot down to the door and looked through the fish-eye spyhole. Shaking his head, he opened the door to an extraordinary sight.

Jane Field was wearing an unbuttoned brown herringbone riding jacket over a white roll-neck top, dark brown suede high-line chaps – cut away at the front and rear to expose tight white breeches – and shiny brown leather boots. In her left hand she held a riding hat, and in her right a rolled, fierce-looking hunt crop, complete with a staghorn hook and Beaufort thongs. She looked him directly in the eyes, a slight curl of amusement playing over her mouth.

'I ride in the desert for two hours, early every morning,' she said, walking in and kicking the door closed behind her. 'So he's used to me coming back all sweaty and messed up.'

Dropping the hat and crop, she kissed him, her breathing already hard and sharp. Then she broke away and looked at him curiously,

her eyes now glazing over in a kind of aroused dreaminess he had seen before in some highly sexed women. Women wanting sex, not him. 'I just hope you're not a typical PR man, Blake. You know? All talk . . .'

It was a bad line which Blake had heard too often over the years, and one that still needled him. She needed teaching a lesson. He bent down and picked up the hunt crop.

'Welcome to the "bridle" suite,' he said, looping the whip over her head and down to her waist, and pulling her slowly towards him

8

Gerhard Richter had actually taken a bath. More than that, he had washed his hair and put on his one suit for his lunch with Miss Wilkins Like his father, he had never worn a tie in his life, and so he sported a yellow polo-neck sweater.

As he found her address – a large stuccoed house long since converted into flats – he knew exactly what to expect inside. Chintzy curtains, underpowered standard lamps, heavily patterned William Morris wallpaper, an old upright piano, brooding mahogany furniture, too many rugs and cushions, countless silver-framed yellowing photographs of godchildren and long-dead relatives, potted plants, and a cocktail of aromas that would have spirited Proust straight back to his childhood – beeswax, eau de Cologne, mothballs, medicine cabinets, spices and that dead-fly smell of neglected conservatories.

She opened her door on to a dazzling plain white, brilliantly lit hall. On the walls was a collection of dramatic ebony African tribal masks. Thundering from the sitting room came atonal music by Birtwistle.

'Come in! I'll turn that down!' she shouted, and fled inside.

Richter was trying to make sense of what he thought he had just seen. Miss Wilkins was wearing some kind of kaftan-like cream shift, with her hair – *always* hitherto piled in a neat bun – loose and knotted with a bizarre brightly coloured scarf. Her bare feet had slapped across the parquet floor.

Then there was a powerful New Age smell about the place. The last time he had encountered anything like it had been in a seedy Jamaican club he had stumbled into last year during the Notting Hill carnival. Then the smell had turned out to be a blend of curried goat and marihuana.

The sitting room was an eclectic mixture of styles. Again plain white walls, more African art, some cubist pictures, Chagall prints, a hanging mobile sculpture in one corner, a Grecian marble torso on a plinth in another, and over the fireplace the biggest convex mirror he had ever seen. The hi-fi system had huge black tower speakers that would not have looked out of place at a rock concert.

'Now, Gerhard, what can I get you to drink?'

'A beer, please.'

'Holstein or Bud Lite?'

He was amazed that she would even have such a thing as a beer, let alone a choice of brands 'A Bud. Please.'

She brought him the bottle 'No need for a glass?' She was sipping a glass of white wine and joined him, hitching up her shift slightly, and adopting the lotus position on a large bean-bag that she had thrown across the floor close to his chair. 'So, Gerhard. What's new with you? You're self-employed, you said.'

Richter blushed. 'I am trying to make a little money. For my hobby. Computers, of course.'

'And exactly how are you trying to make this money?'

Blushing more deeply, he confessed, 'What I am doing is not completely legal, I think.'

'Tell me. You can trust me. As you can see' – she waved her arms around her – 'none of us is ever exactly what we seem.'

'Well,' he said, pleased to be able to share his carefully planned scheme with someone else, 'you see, I love numbers. Too much maybe. It is a kind of illness. Numeromania. I think I am a little bit like the composer, Anton Bruckner He could not stop counting. His breaths, his footsteps, the number of cathedral gables, how many times the bell rang for matins . . .

Always counting, counting, counting. It drove him a little crazy, I think.'

Miss Wilkins noted the tacit admission that Richter also thought of himself as a 'little crazy'. 'And you are the same With numbers?'

'*Ja*. Always numbers. And things like palindromes. Haydn's palindrome symphony drives *me* crazy. Brilliant. All the best musicians are good mathematicians. And I think the best computer geniuses could be great musicians also.'

'So come on. What is it you're up to?'

'I think it is a great idea,' he said, warming to his favourite subject – his own genius. 'I hacked into a database marketing company and took a list of ten thousand top earners. Then I sent a personally signed letter to each of them telling them about a monthly newsletter I was about to produce, and which would use my own unique computer probability program to predict future events. In the letter I predicted the outcome of a big takeover bid about to be decided. Half my letters said one side would win, the rest said the other would win.

'A month later, I wrote only to the people who got the correct prediction, with another forecast There was a Monopolies and Mergers Commission report due out on whether the banks should be allowed to continue selling insurance products to their account holders. It was really affecting the share prices of banks and insurance corporations. A big debate. Remember? So once again, to half the five thousand people I predicted one outcome, and to the rest the other.'

Miss Wilkins had already seen where this was leading 'So you now have 2500 top earners who think your computer predictions are so far 100 per cent accurate.'

'This is so. I'm now on my last "free" prediction to the remaining group. Then to the half that will have had three correct predictions, I ask them to pay £500 a year. To keep getting my forecasts each month for a further nine months. That will be 1250 high-net-worth individuals. If they all subscribed, I'd receive £625,000. But I only expect maybe twenty per cent take-up – perhaps bringing me £125,000.'

'And then what do you do?'

'I simply meet my promise by sending them one prediction a month Any old prediction. It doesn't matter to me any more whether they are right or not. After that I close my

box number post address, and they never hear from me again. Good. Yes?'

Miss Wilkins was impressed by the beautiful simplicity of it. That it was criminal she had no doubt. Intention to defraud, probably. Also, she felt he was being optimistic with his estimate of 20 per cent uptake. It would probably be nearer five. But even that would bring him in over £30,000. She had to applaud the cunning, logical mind that had devised the scam.

'So. You know what I do now. And it does not take much of my time. What is it you want? My departure from Chiasmus was not exactly friendly,' he said, slurping his beer.

She got up to serve lunch – it *was* curried goat – and began to tell him her own news. He found both hard to digest. How could they fire her, of all people? It made him even more curious to know why she had called, and he asked again what she wanted from him.

'Simply this,' she replied at last, as they ate. 'I am going to bring down SGT and its chairman, Sool Kay-Sheen. For myself, for others who have lost their careers. And for someone who lost his life because of their asset-stripping rightsizing. I have an evening job there. As a cleaner.' She held her hand up to stop some ribald response. 'I have planned a series of things that will make Sool Kay-Sheen a laughing stock, and that will bankrupt and dishonour him. This will culminate in a complete gridlock of every computer and work station in the SGT empire, and that of everyone connected to it around the world – suppliers and customers I will bring them all to their knees. Unable to trade. Anywhere. For as long as it takes to break SGT.'

Richter whistled. This was a side of Miss Wilkins he had never dreamed existed. 'Maybe you are a little crazy too.'

'Maybe I am. But I need the best hacker in the world to help me. I need you.'

Richter pumped himself up. Yes. He could be the best. Better than any of them. 'What do you want me to do?'

'I want you to join me as a cleaner, working nights. In return you'll have what you've always dreamed of. Unlimited access to high-powered computing and all the time in the world to devise the most devastating, most sophisticated computer viruses ever seen Viruses, logic bombs . . . Just think. All I want is for you to mount a stage that will show your talents

for what they are. Simply the best. You would become the new legend.'

Richter's face lit up. Dark Invader, Byte Ripper, Captain Zap, Soviet Eddie, the 1813, Smeg, Rabbit, Jerusalem, Kevin Mitnick . . . the roll call of his heroes and viruses. Especially Mitnick, the uncrowned king, known and feared, or hero-worshipped, depending which side you were on. This was his chance to join them on equal terms. Maybe even surpass them with a virus of such sophistication it would be uncrackable. It needed no thought, no careful deliberation.

'I'll do it. Count me in. For sure.'

Jane showered while Blake had breakfast brought in. She was too well known to be seen in his room. Then she joined him on the terrace, watching a clear new desert day beginning.

'That wasn't exactly what you'd call safe sex, you know,' she said, pouring herself some juice. 'He'd kill both of us if he ever found out.'

Blake smiled bravely, hoping she was joking. 'You know him better than me. But I'd die happy.' He almost meant it. Sex between them had at first been athletic, competitive even as their strong personalities had tested and explored each other Yet it had ended with a tenderness neither had expected. They had stayed in each other's arms for a long time afterwards, not speaking. Each had felt somehow lost and found, clinging to the wreckage, holding on together.

He leaned over and kissed her, brushing a strand of wet hair off her cheek. It was an act to be expected of affectionate old lovers, not of two materialistic virtual strangers taking pleasure where they found it. There was none of the guilt, embarrassment, or even hostility that usually followed hurried, opportunistic sex. They both sensed it.

'You know, I'm not just a semi retired model. I also read minds,' she said.

'And what am I thinking?'

'You're thinking, what's this once-gorgeous – still pretty damned good! – but once-gorgeous girl doing with a man like Sool. Right?'

'Something like that. Of course I'd like to know.'

'Well, I don't have a simple answer,' she went on, serious now. 'As a model you don't have a lifestyle that makes relationships easy.

And I had a few grade-one disasters. That and the constant travel led to my long and lasting affair with a neat, smooth Russian friend called Stolichnaya. Stolly to his friends. He was always there. Never let me down. But he did begin to affect my looks. It's easy to see your latest line when your face is across forty-eight-sheet posters. And Stolly was also making me moody. And difficult. *Me* difficult. Can you believe that?'

'Oh, I have a good friend from Scotland who sounds very like your Stolly. His name's Johnnie. But promise not to out me.' They smiled. She stood up and looked out from the terrace, her face clouding again.

'So why Sool?' she went on, wanting to tell him things before her confidence deserted her. 'I met him at a charity dinner party. He was charming. Childlike in some ways. I saw him again because he *asked* me. I mean he courted me, pursued me. Dammit, he wanted me, and that meant a lot to me then. I was still having big drink problems, and he arranged for me to see an analyst, and then to dry out and get therapy at a clinic. He cared.

'Sure, there was the money. The power. He was far richer than all the playboys and showbiz types I'd been seeing. I mean, I was – I am – financially OK myself. I'd looked after my money from the Chanel days. But his wealth was unreal. Why did Jackie Kennedy fall for Onassis? Or Callas before her? Kissinger once said that power is the world's strongest aphrodisiac. Maybe for some people that's true. Maybe I was one of them.' She turned back to him, her eyes defiant. 'That's it. We've been together over a year.'

He stood up and held her. 'And now?' he asked gently.

'Now I'm scared,' she said, unhappily. 'I've seen behind that smiling mask he uses. You saw just a little of it last night. He's getting more and more obsessive. About me. He demands that I'm on call the whole time. He thinks I can help him spot enemies. And he always wants to know exactly where I've been, exactly who I saw. He wants to know who I was talking to if he calls and the line's busy. And he's getting more and more obsessive with other people too. He really bawls them out for being even seconds late for something. He gets mad if the temperature in the room isn't exactly what he thinks he wants. He's stopped eating in restaurants.

'And I've seen him hit his company people if they do something wrong. It's horrible. They just stand there, head hung, and let him smack them about the face. I can't bear much more of it. He's

started beating up on me too. He would have after you'd gone, but I locked myself in my room while he stayed up and drank all night. It's not like when he hits them. He gets off on it. And I have to pretend to like it.'

'Why don't you leave him?' Blake asked, a little accusingly.

She pushed him away angrily, her own mood suddenly changing, and went back to the bedroom to dress.

'Why don't you?' he persisted, following her.

Blake's predictable male response annoyed her – implying she stayed because she liked being hit, and that by staying the beatings were her fault, not Sool's. Hands on her hips, she turned. 'I told you I'm scared. Of him. And of me '

'Of you?'

'At least he's kept me off the juice – and anything worse. Coke doesn't screw up your looks like vodka, you know Ask any *super*model.'

When she had finally dressed, she looked at her watch and became panicky. She was going to be late back.

'When will I see you?' he asked, panicky himself at suddenly losing her, at being relegated after all to a one-night, one-morning stand.

She shook her head and ran to the door. 'I don't know. Back off, Blake. I mean, maybe this was a real bad idea, you know?' Distracted by the pressure of time and clearly afraid, she looked at him one last time and ran out.

Blake closed the door gently after her and went back to the bedroom, her fragrance still there, her pillow still holding her shape. The room had stopped sneering at him and now, like an old pal, seemed to share his reflective, restless mood

Pangalos's lawyer was good He missed nothing

'My client had to ask to see Special Agent Trent's creds before FBI involvement was established. That I take it is not in dispute here. And so I put it to you again, was this an NYPD or FBI operation? And under which law are you seeking to detain Mr Pangalos?' He was young and sharp, speaking slowly and politely. His pallor was that of someone who had been a bookworm from youth, and his dress and demeanour those of a young man aping his elders.

'For the fifth time, this was an NYPD vice raid. Something your client has experienced many times before. During the execution of this raid a copy of a videotape, labelled Nippon Eight, was

discovered. On inspection it was found to depict acts of gross indecency and violence to a woman whose mutilated body is the subject of a homicide investigation in L.A. Your client is currently being held on vice charges. We have yet to establish evidence for accessory to murder, but you will be the first to hear if we do. That's it.' The seen-it-all lieutenant was also pretty sharp.

'And this videotape was allegedly found, not by an NYPD officer on what should have been a legitimate raid, but by a federal agent. A federal agent who did not disclose his real status, and who allegedly found the tape when you and your two officers were out of sight in the back room. Is that right?'

'Substantially, yes,' said the lieutenant. 'Except you seem to keep ignoring the small matter of our finding Pangalos's prints all over the cassette.'

'And you are aware that my client is adamant he had never seen the tape before Trent threw it at him.'

Trent had been resisting the growing temptation to butt in and challenge the obnoxious lawyer. Something in that last comment, however, gave him an idea. It entailed some risk, but it might just work.

'Pangalos. You're accusing me of planting that tape. Let's not fool around here,' he said directly to the sweating Greek. 'You think I brought that cassette there myself.'

'You know it!' Pangalos spat, not even looking him.

'So, why don't we both take a polygraph test. The lie detector. It's your word against mine. Let's do it. What do you say, fat man?'

The lawyer looked up, genuinely surprised. He knew that Pangalos was telling the truth. That tape had been planted. The lieutenant also looked surprised. Trent had all but admitted to him that he had planted the thing. What the hell was he doing? The lawyer noticed the lieutenant's reaction and spoke quietly to Pangalos for a few minutes.

Pangalos nodded, and the lawyer responded. 'OK. You got it. Go ahead. But with an examiner of our choice. Not one of your staff people.' All major FBI field offices have their own polygraph unit, running to a total budget of some $55 million a year.

'I'll agree to any recognised independent practitioner,' Trent confirmed.

There have been many attempts over the centuries to find ways to make people tell the truth. Medieval torture chambers are

testimony to this, as is swearing on oath, with its choice between truthfulness and Faustian damnation. Hypnosis seemed a new way ahead, until suggestibility was better understood Then the chemists tried. Sodium pentothal, scopolamine. But suggestibility remained a problem, with subjects still saying what they thought the interrogator wanted to hear.

The polygraph, although not perfect, is now recognised by the courts as the best lie detector methodology available. An FBI survey of 20,000 cases, dating back to 1973, points to a remarkable accuracy rating of 99 per cent The procedure is to wire up the subject so that readings of heart rate, blood pressure, respiration and skin resistance can be monitored during skilled questioning. At the start the examiner, normally a trained psychologist, checks the subject's responses to a number of control questions which are used to set a benchmark for judging readings made during the session. The challenge is to avoid 'false positives' – people telling the truth registering as liars – and 'false negatives' – liars registering as truthful.

It took the lawyer one hour to track down the Swedish doctor, a psychologist he had used before, and it took the Swede another three to brief himself fully. Most problems with polygraph tests result from examiner error. Everyone – Trent, the lieutenant, Pangalos and his lawyer – wanted to move quickly, and at six thirty that evening, they were at the Fourth Avenue practice. Trent had agreed to be tested first. The pneumograph tube ran around his chest, the blood pressure cuff was strapped around his arm and his fingers were wired The machine had been recording for five minutes and he had already spotted two of the control questions against which they would check the big one when it came.

As part of his training, he had learned how best to mislead a polygraph. For the control questions, and in preparation for the important real one, he suddenly changed his thought processes and sharply focused his mind to try to alter his physical response to stimuli. To achieve this he also bit his tongue hard, pushed the big toe of his right foot on to a tack he had hammered into his shoe, and began mentally counting backwards from 200 in sevens.

His tactic was to stress himself both physically and mentally to an extreme degree for the control questions, so that when the direct question finally came – 'Did you plant the tape?' – his response, as recorded on the machine, registered normal.

After half an hour, the Swede was satisfied, and freed Trent from the monitor. He made him leave before bringing in Pangalos and starting the procedure all over again. The lawyer and the lieutenant were allowed to stay, to act as witnesses to the fairness of the conduct of the tests.

The doctor worked patiently, asking the usual establishing questions. The Greek was obviously nervous, but that would be compensated for in the results.

'Did you see Special Agent Trent produce the tape himself?' the doctor went on.

'Yes. Yes.'

'Did he falsely claim to have found it on your property?'

'Again, yes.'

The lieutenant could see the tracers on the impulse read-outs remaining constant. Pangalos was telling the truth.

'Do you believe that Special Agent Trent deliberately planted the tape on you?'

'Yes.'

Again the tracers recorded average responses. The doctor was an old pro, and he knew – as the lieutenant had – that Trent had cheated the system. He also knew that Pangalos was being honest in his replies. Why then had Trent suggested the polygraph? As he came to the end of the session he asked a few more routine questions to round off, before putting one that Trent had specifically asked the lieutenant to request.

'Mr Pangalos, had you ever *seen* that video before?'

'No! Never.'

The readings immediately shot across. This time he was lying.

The doctor thought quickly. The specific question he had been asked to pose was ambiguous. Deliberately so, he now recognised. Had Pangalos seen the tape before, in the sense of the actual casement, the packaging, that physical copy of it? On this point he now had no professional doubt that the Greek had not. Trent had planted it. Or had he seen, viewed, watched the actual recording itself before. *That* was the question Pangalos thought he had just answered.

'You had never watched that video, labelled Nippon Eight, before?'

'No.'

Once more the monitors raced across. The lawyer noticed this time, and he shot a puzzled look at the Swede.

'That's it, Mr Pangalos. I'll unhook you now,' the doctor said, and he turned to the observers. 'You'll have my report tomorrow.'

'But what's the top line?' the lawyer asked. Something had happened that he did not understand.

'I'm a scientist. Not Gypsy Rose Lee. I need to conduct my analysis As I said, you'll have it tomorrow.'

On their way out, the lieutenant quickly told Trent what he had seen. Trent looked excited and, saying he had left something behind, went back into the consulting room 'I heard,' he said. 'What does it mean?'

'Like I told the lieutenant. Tomorrow.'

'Tomorrow another young Japanese girl may be dead, Doctor.'

The psychologist looked at him sharply and frowned. 'Very well. Unofficially, and provisionally, this is it. I think you lied through your teeth. Or was it your foot?' Trent smiled at him, but said nothing. 'And Pangalos told the truth. You did plant that tape.'

'And the question you agreed to include for us. What did his answer to that mean?'

'Whatever was on that tape, he'd seen it. He knew exactly what Nippon Eight was.'

'Say that. Say that in your report. I don't give a damn what you decide to say about me. But record that he had watched that video. It's enough to move us right on. It's our first break in months And please, have the results formally reviewed by the Bureau's polygraph unit. You know it? Seventh and D Streets NW. Washington, DC. Will you do that for me?'

Trent left feeling better than he had in a long time. If they really did have proof that Pangalos had even watched one of the tapes, then they also now had a direct link between him and Sool Kay-Sheen. His gamble had paid off. He could feel the net closing in on the Korean.

9

It was only her third stint, but Miss Wilkins now felt terrifically confident. Three office workers that night had ignored her, far less recognised her – just like David Mann.

There was also something surprisingly satisfying about the job The physical exertion gave her a high, as aerobics might. Yet the very repetitiveness, and the intellectually undemanding nature of the work, allowed her mind the freedom to roam or concentrate on any subjects she pleased.

It was 9.15 before the last person had gone. She cheerily called goodnight to him, but in response received nothing more than the kind of look he might have directed at a madwoman waving from a Bedlam window.

Her target for the night was something that would directly hurt Sool, and his parent company, not just Chiasmus. SGT had been slow to enter the super-microchip race. Hugely powerful semi-conductors offering sixty-four-bit computing had been pioneered by Digital with their Alpha chip to drive voraciously power hungry software applications such as Windows from Microsoft and those

of the Apple Macintosh family. Chiasmus had a revolutionary gallium arsenide low-cost super-chip in development, but SGT, as new owners, were impatient to match today what the leaders in the industry were already offering. Development work on the Chiasmus chip had been stopped, and SGT technicians in Seoul instructed to pirate technology from others.

This had led to a barrage of accusations and counter-accusations, and there were two legal actions being brought in the European Union and in the USA for blatant infringements of intellectual copyright. It had all come at a particularly sensitive time. The protectionist voices in the USA and Europe were gaining ascendancy as job cuts continued relentlessly, hitting all strata of society. Somebody had to be blamed, and Japan and the tiger economies were the first in line. The pressure for tight import controls, quotas and tariffs was becoming unstoppable in the West. But despite all the accusations, and law suits lasting years, the one thing missing was hard, incontrovertible evidence of piracy. If they found that, the protectionist rednecks would have their day, and Japan, Korea, the Philippines, Malaya, Taiwan, China and, especially, its just-repossessed Hong Kong would find themselves on the wrong end of a one-sided trade war with the West.

Miss Wilkins switched on her PC, logged in and once again accessed David Mann's files. She went straight into one named Omega, the working title of their developmental super chip. Scrolling through the sub-files, she found the reference she was looking for, and printed it off. It came up on the private printer in her office to the right of her desk. Skim-reading it, to check it was what she remembered, she made three more copies on SGT headed paper, logged out and switched off the PC and printer. Then she looked up in Vachers the address of the European Commissioner for Competition Policy in Brussels. If she posted it tomorrow, it should arrive by Friday. Then the balloon would really go up. The Commissioner, a Gaullist Frenchman, was the first strongly protectionist minister to hold the position. He had made it clear in very blunt talks with the Japanese and Koreans that he wanted to see a rapid narrowing of the yawning trade imbalance with Europe, and an end to the raft of tariff and non-tariff barriers to trade which they blatantly used to keep out Western imports.

The SGT internal correspondence she was sending him – anonymously – had passed between a furious Sir Lucien and

Sool Kay-Sheen some months earlier. In it Sir Lucien had deplored Sool's decision to stop all work on Omega, and refused to have any Chiasmus technicians in any way involved in the pirating of competitors' designs. The report then had a paragraph of legal gobbledegook drafted by the lawyers to protect individual UK board members from any exposure if legal action was instigated by the intellectual copyright owners whose rights SGT was infringing. It was dynamite, and would she knew be used aggressively in Brussels. To make absolutely sure, she also sent a copy to the technology correspondent on the *Financial Times*, and one to the secretary of ETSI, the powerful industry standards organisation on which all the leading manufacturers were represented. A fourth copy she kept for herself.

Later she went down a couple of floors to find Molly Spink She needed her agreement to bring in Gerhard Richter to work alongside her. It was not something she was looking forward to asking. It felt like one favour too far.

Her instincts proved right. Molly looked and felt uncomfortable and not a little annoyed. 'How long will it be for?' she demanded.

'A month. Maybe less. I know it's asking a lot of you.'

'I can't pay any more money There s only enough work for one on each floor.'

'I understand that.'

Molly snorted like a cross horse. 'Very well. But you'll have to say you're job-sharing if anyone asks.'

International directors in large public relations companies are rarely popular with their colleagues.

In part it is because they get all the peach travel opportunities – the Far East, the USA, Europe's capitals and, increasingly, South Africa. People who do not have to travel regularly simply cannot accept that trips to Moscow, Istanbul, Miami, Johannesburg or Tokyo can be anything other than expense-account perks. The truth is that most are short-notice, short-duration trips with very early starts and late nights, spent in hotels, airports and meeting rooms full of chain-smoking Johnny foreigners The truth is that work stacks up relentlessly back at the office And the truth is that there are just so many delayed flights, lonely king-size beds and badly cooked steaks a person can bear.

Another reason for the unpopularity is their ill-defined roving

authority over the national offices they visit, and their penchant for attempting to commandeer the best local staff for international assignments.

Blake saw all of this, and more, in the London MD's eyes as he beamed his shark's smile and followed him around the dated '80s atrium and into his office Mike Turner was thirty-eight and ran a tight ship of 120 people on a fee income of just under £7 million a year. There were consumer product clients, financial companies – banks, insurance firms – specialist healthcare and technology units, travel industry clients and a respected City/investor relations group. It was the two top people in this last team that Blake wanted at short notice on his SGT China project. Over strong coffee to fight the jet lag, he explained the bare bones of what he needed over the next two weeks.

Turner barked a humourless laugh. 'Can't help. Sorry. There's a hostile bid going in any day now from one of our clients. They're both needed for that.' He did not sound sorry at all. 'Get New York to lead.'

'New York's financial team sucks. We can't screw up on this one. That's not an option. Or the entire SGT contract goes down the pan ' Blake was conscious that his accent was still based somewhere in the mid-Atlantic. 'I've got new business targets to meet, just like you. And there are very, very few seven-figure accounts out there. Believe me.'

A quiet bleep came from Turner's PC and another E-mail message came in. He glanced at the screen to see the subject, and looked away again. His phone then rang. Instead of cutting short what was obviously a non-urgent call, he unhurriedly completed it. Blake was getting the message loud and clear.

Five minutes later the call was over, and Turner finally looked back at him. 'Look. You're here tomorrow? Leave it with me. I'll see if I can do anything.' That meant he would take at least a day to come back and say he still could do nothing to help.

'No. I've no time to lose. I need all the financial centres to be specially targeted with the China news – New York, London, Frankfurt, Tokyo and Hong Kong. Plus all the wire services. I also need a video news release shot And I've got less than two weeks, and a difficult, unpredictable client. I'll have to clear everything with the bloody Chinese, and I'll have to be out there myself in Hong Kong with Sool for the big announcement. I

can't trust all of that to the clowns in New York. I need your two.'

'But the bid . . .'

Blake stood up, put both his hands on Turner's desk and leaned forward with calculated menace. 'You were a merchant banker three years ago. That's really why the old man hired you – to lead on IR for the entire network. Not to hide from client contact in a tidy, already well-run local office, with your door shut What percentage of your time is account handling?' All executives fed into their PCs each day a time sheet to show what they had been doing. This helped monitor account profitability, and the profitability of each person in relation to the fees they generated. The arithmetic meant that everyone had to handle at least 3.5 times their salaries in fees each year if they were to earn their keep.

Turner looked defiant. He had not liked Blake bringing up 'the old man', the tough, veteran founder and president of Globecom. 'I don't see what my time sheets have to do with anything . . .'

'Let me save you trying to recall Your client handling last month was down to below thirty per cent. I know you've got a business to run, but believe me, the old man would very much like to see that back above fifty per cent, and rising. Handle that hostile bid yourself. Keep your hand in. That's what the old man would say Believe me I know. That way we solve your problem. And mine.'

Turner was close to fighting back, but his keen sense of self-preservation stopped him. Besides, he knew that Blake was right. He had wanted to leave merchant banking because he was sick of client contact. Then there had been the call from the headhunter – Globecom wanted to increase its IR and corporate presence in London. The president had liked him, offering him the top job After the first year, sharp-end contact with Globecom's clients had proved no more challenging than at the bank, but he had enjoyed his first taste of general management. So yes, he was acutely aware that he had deliberately let his client handling percentage fall to well below the level expected of him. And more seriously had not increased the IR business to a size that came even near to challenging the specialist leaders.

Without showing any sign of response to Blake's hard-ball play, he picked up his phone and dialled a three-digit internal number. 'Peter. Could you pop in. With Bob I've decided to put you on a

drop-everything, international job It's a biggie. I've got John Blake over to brief you.'

Blake felt an almighty jet-lag yawn coming on. He looked directly at Turner and made no attempt to stifle it.

Jane Field was sitting in one of the VIP seats in the rear of the $35 million company jet, her table strewn with fashion magazines. Her glass of Evian was topped up regularly by the stewardess from the galley, just behind. Sool was forward, at the business work station, using the IBM satellite-based airborne voice and data networks, retrieving his E-mail messages and barking orders around his empire by teleconference. His supremely loyal private assistant, Park, was sitting behind, as ever.

The pilot had flown them out of Las Vegas an hour earlier, and Sool's state-of-the-art company jet was speeding them at 550 miles an hour to New York's La Guardia. They were in the Gulfstream V which two months earlier had replaced the trusty GIV. Powered by the all-new BMW Rolls-Royce BR710 turbofan, it had a more extensive 7500-mile range. With its crew of three – pilot, co-pilot and stewardess – its hangar fees, fuel and service costs, airport and landing charges, plus the compulsory aviation inspections, the GV cost $5000 an hour to operate. Small change to Sool who had long since refused to fly anywhere scheduled.

He was on his way to New York because he wanted to be at his bank's Wall Street offices when the news of the Kuruma Motors heads of agreement with China was announced the next day, Thursday. His entire company was riding on the futures contracts which effectively wagered that the Nikkei Tokyo stock market index would rise dramatically. If anything unexpected happened – like another Japanese earthquake, such as hit Kobe in January 1995 – then he needed to be there with the traders to direct them He had already checked that the Kuruma news did not coincide with any governmental or other planned release of information that could make the markets volatile – such as balance of trade figures or reserves. Anyway, this thing was altogether too big, too exciting for him to sit on his hands in Las Vegas.

'How long will we stay in New York?' Jane asked, having wandered forward She liked the Trump Tower apartment and would have an opportunity of seeing an old girlfriend. Her feelings about Blake needed talking through with someone she

could trust She was too world-weary to hope for much. But she had liked him.

'You, two weeks or so. I must go back to Seoul briefly Then the Philippines, before returning to New York,' he said, not looking up from the screen. 'Then we go to Hong Kong. Blake will join us there.'

Her spirits lifted, but she kept her feelings well hidden. 'You keep mentioning this Hong Kong visit. What's happening?'

At last he looked up, and seemed to be taking some trouble to find the right words to express what he wanted to convey. 'I'm going pig-sticking,' he said finally, seemingly pleased with his turn of phrase.

It was a horrible expression. One that she had never heard him use before. She did not know what he meant by it, but shuddered at the image conjured up, and for whoever was to be the target of Sool's latest obsessive hatred.

Pig-sticking. Pig-sticking The phrase repeated itself over and over in her mind. She went to the bathroom to splash water on her face. Staring in the mirror, she knew more than ever before that she had to escape from him His sudden violence and increasingly degrading sexual demands were terrifying and disgusting her. Last night had been the worst to date. The more he humiliated her, the less respect he had left for her, so the more he humiliated her . . . It was an endless cycle. Blake, on closer examination, might not be the solution, but for now he could serve as an emblem of what she needed. She had surprised him by visiting his room in Las Vegas again early that morning, his last day. They had made love once more, and afterwards had talked, getting to know each other. Jane had some time ago realised that she was the kind of woman who always needed someone in her life. Someone to lean on. Someone to keep her from slipping back again. She knew she could have Blake, appreciated her power over him. The thought made her feel better. And just maybe something might work out.

As they had showered together, he had asked what she was doing over the next couple of weeks – before Hong Kong. 'I was thinking of popping over to Milan for a few days. The collection season's under way, and I've been asked to do a special appearance there for Lagerfeld. Karl and I go back to the Chanel days,' she said.

Blake had smiled and held her. 'You know, I haven't visited our

Milan office for quite a while,' he had responded. 'It's been far too long. I think I should fix that. Don't you?'

As they were on the approach to New York, Sool finally stopped working and came back to sit by her She looked up from her magazine. 'I've been offered a small job while you're away. Just a few days,' she said matter-of-factly. I may as well take it.'

'Where?' He was not really interested

'Milan. It's collection time.'

'Why not?' he said.

Why not indeed? she said to herself, suddenly feeling tremendously excited.

10

The speed with which Miss Wilkins had settled into her new dual life, as cleaner and saboteur, had taken her by surprise. Twenty-six years as a senior secretary, and after just a few days this now seemed like a familiar second life. It made her realise that she should have done something different many years earlier. But Chiasmus had been like a warm bath, hard to leave. Also they had needed her. Until the Koreans.

She had already shaved some forty-five minutes off the time it took to complete her cleaning duties, and by ten o'clock she was free to do as she pleased. Now, having Richter with her complicated things. He did no cleaning, and simply closeted himself by a work station out of view of the usual handful of late-stayers. Occasionally he went downstairs a floor to the specially air- and humidity-conditioned mainframe room. But he said little and simply kept her posted in layman's language on his progress in developing the cocktail of nasties that they hoped would eventually sink SGT. He was a workaholic, and on his first night she had to force him to leave with her at around two o'clock.

Otherwise he would have been there until people arrived for work, having no idea of the time.

It was now almost eleven o'clock Thursday, and she logged in as usual to David Mann's E-mail. His log-in name was DavidM and his password – which in blatant disregard for company rules he never changed – was MontyM, the name of one of his dogs.

She saw from some messages, with satisfaction, that the VARs were already in open revolt. 'King' Caplan had indeed called a meeting of the Chiasmus Dealers Association over the Computashop terms, and Mann would be forced to make a humiliating climbdown. In response, Computashop would almost certainly delist Chiasmus, thereby depriving the company of a substantial share of the increasingly important volume PC market. The trade press was having a field day, calling on Mann to resign.

Soon there would be the response from the European Union Competition Policy Commissioner about intellectual property rights, the second time-bomb ticking nicely away.

It was time, she decided, for another attack on Mann. There were so many things she knew about him that it was difficult to decide which one to choose. There was his insider dealing in Chiasmus's shares hours before the SGT approach. As the then finance director, he had got wind of the hostile bid early, through some good work by the company's brokers. Then there was his outrageous fiddling of expenses. For example, he had the travel manager book all his flights first class, and Concorde to the States, whenever he was out seeing customers or suppliers. But invariably he would then downgrade himself to club or even tourist class, and pocket the difference. In addition there were his charge-card expenses around the Geneva Telecom exhibition, a trip that had seemed to merge seamlessly into an extravagant week immediately afterwards, skiing in Zermatt with his wife and daughters.

She settled on his involvement in a small company where he was a non-executive director. It was in laser sighting technology, mostly for use in the defence industry. The unexpected cancellation of a large Saudi contract had floored the firm, and it had subsequently been put into receivership by its major debenture holder, one of the clearing banks. Unsecured creditors – mostly small suppliers – had been abandoned, with claims of over £2 million. Some had accused the management of continuing to trade while they knew the company was insolvent – a criminal offence under the Companies

Act. There had already been a Department of Trade and Industry investigation, following pressure by a Labour Member of Parliament from one of the creditors' constituencies. Despite strong suspicions, however, there had not been enough evidence, and like so many others the case was quietly dropped, leaving innocent suppliers facing ruin.

Like the arrogant fool he was, Mann had brought his personal files from the company to his Chiasmus office – out of sight of the receiver and the DTI investigators. His secretary had complained to Miss Wilkins about being dragooned into typing up some of his lengthy correspondence on the subject. From everything he had said, it was crystal clear to her that he and the other directors had certainly known the firm to be insolvent, trading until the last possible moment in the hope of somehow landing another big order, whilst sitting on creditors' bills. He had later asked her to shred several of these files for him – too lazy to do it himself. But his secretary, resentful at being used for non-Chiasmus business – especially this business – had first weeded them, passing several damning documents to Miss Wilkins, including a set of bound minutes giving incontrovertible evidence of his culpability.

Rummaging through an old fashioned metal filing cabinet in her office, she found the documents, code-marked Office Procedures Manual. With a smile of quiet satisfaction, she photocopied them and then put the originals in an envelope to the Labour MP who, after more than a year, was still putting down parliamentary questions about the case to the President of the Board of Trade. She would post it in the morning from another part of London, where she was visiting Mavis the next day.

Ian Lilley's funeral was taking place the following week at his local north London church. She had checked David Mann's diary and seen that he was planning to be there, guilt, rather than friendship, being the motivating force. She knew from Mavis that a number of Ian's real friends from the office were attending. It all still seemed so stupid So wasteful A perfectly good company foot soldier – reliable, honest, hard-working – sacrificed ten years before retirement on the altar of some unaccountable, unelected god of business efficiency.

The business heroes of the day, she thought sourly, were now butchers, not builders. Any fool with a chainsaw can cut costs and overheads, egged on by humourless management consultants – arrogant, self-centred young men with no sharp-end business

experience beyond running a university rag ball. The people *she* admired built and grew businesses. They innovated. They developed the people around them, who in return would give that extra yard of time and talent without being asked Young people now were being told there was no such thing as security of employment. They could hope only for 'security of employability'. It was, she knew, a very dangerous path for society. When these 'Me Plc' individuals did get some power, they would use it ruthlessly back on the people who created these dog-eat-dog conditions. Calls for corporate spirit and community conscience would fall on very deaf ears.

All of this was now academic for poor Ian Lilley, however, and for the tens of thousands of others society had let down.

'Miss Wilkins, I think I need to talk. To tell you.' Gerhard Richter's voice startled her. He had loomed up behind her in Mann's office, catching her looking through his diary. The shock of being discovered reminded her suddenly of the criminality of what they were doing.

'Goodness! You gave me a start,' she said out loud, whilst thinking to herself that she should have scented him coming. He had stopped bathing again.

Richter smirked and flattened his hair with his podgy hand. '*Oh, Entschuldigung*. I will be more noisy. Ha! Like this. Ha!' He mimicked a noisy Frankenstein monster – a flat-footed walk, arms swinging in time with his legs.

'What is it?' Miss Wilkins found him hard work at the best of times, but his attempts at humour were altogether too much

He grinned, having at least amused himself, before becoming serious again. 'I think I have succeeded. I have developed the idea already for a beautiful virus. You need to understand it. It is serious. If we use it, I may not be able to control my baby. It is a little bit scary, I think.'

Miss Wilkins was herself fairly computer-literate, but she knew that Richter was on another plane. 'Sit down,' she said. 'Explain it *simply*.'

Richter sat as instructed, leaning forward, anxious to share his work, anxious to show off. 'There are two main ways to infect and bring down a computer system. The best known is a computer virus ' He pronounced it 'wirus'. 'It is like a biological virus. It needs a host. A body on which it can grow and multiply. So there is a need for a

living cell for it to feed on. In computing, a virus is such a parasite, feeding off programs.'

'And because of this, many computers – our own included – have anti-virus programs written in as standard protection,' she interrupted. 'It's not as easy to introduce them as it was.'

'Right. They got smart. So I have to be smarter,' he grinned, enjoying himself. 'That's why we won't use a virus. That's for kiddies now.'

She could see that he needed an appreciative audience. He was obviously very pleased with himself, and very excited. Whatever his devious, formidable mind had created was going to be lethal. 'You've got me hooked. Tell all.'

'So. Not a virus. But a *worm*. What the doctors call a helminth. And what I'm calling my "Helminth from Hell". Beautiful name. Yes?'

Miss Wilkins knew that names and general nomenclature were a big part of the hackers' and the phone-phreaks' sub-culture, sharing much with the world of heavy-metal rock music. 'The Helminth from Hell You know best, Gerhard. But what exactly is it?'

'Different to a virus. A worm – although a parasite – can survive on its own. As an individual, moving around under its own power. The idea for the computer worm came from a great sci-fi book. John Brunner's *Shockwave Rider*. You must know it.'

'I'm afraid not.'

'You should read it. The guy beats the government's computer system with his own program. A tapeworm. Ha! They should make it a movie.'

'Go on. Please.'

'Sure. So now we have the Helminth from Hell. Our worm. And better still, I'm making it a vampire worm. These come to life at night, activating themselves when the machines are not being used. So we can use all that power in the network. All of it. Not diluted by others running programs. Also, no one will ever know we're in there. A bit like us now, I think. As cleaners.'

'And it deactivates itself in the morning?'

'For sure. And stores everything ready again for the next night. Picking up where it left off. It's based on great work by two Xerox researchers, trying to make local area network systems more powerful, more efficient.'

'And what exactly will your vampire worm do?'

He looked at her imperiously. 'In a night – maybe two – it will crash

every computer in the SGT network-distributed system. Worldwide. But better still – it will every night improve itself. Creating even more sophisticated blocking programs to make any – *any* – effective vaccine impossible, I think, to develop. Maybe even for me. This is what you must understand. No one will be able to control the thing It will have a life of its own, and a very strong ability to survive anything they throw at it.'

'And will it really work?'

'For sure it will work.'

Miss Wilkins smiled encouragingly. 'Well done Excellent work. You really *are* a genius. When will you have it ready?'

Richter glowed from her praise. 'A week. Maybe.'

Later, as she caught a cab home, she thought about her visit to the widow, Mavis Lilley later that day, and about the power she would soon hold over SGT. Half of her felt like some kind of heroic revolutionary Or at least a Greenpeace warrior taking direct action. Half of her felt foolish and afraid, overawed by the monster she was bringing to life. Richter mimicking Frankenstein earlier had indeed been ironic. Frankensteins, vampires, Helminths from Hell . . . All creatures of destruction And she instinctively a builder, a positive, creative person. Not a wrecker of jobs and businesses And certainly not of Chiasmus. Quite the reverse. What she really wanted was somehow to get her old Chiasmus back, not its annihilation

It was a battle raging within her that she knew needed resolving And quickly.

John Blake was buzzing, never happier than when something big and secret was about to break, with himself at the heart of it – shaping and manipulating.

Working from his London office, he had conducted a computer Textline search of everything the media had been saying for the past year on the Chinese car project, and his research people had trawled Datastream and all the relevant market and industry reports to produce a digest of published information Globecom's Tokyo office had also prepared an overview for him of the main Japanese car manufacturers, including full analysts' reports and forecasts specifically for Kuruma Motor, tracking from its low back in July 1986. There were in addition reports from an assortment of banks and economic research specialists on the short-term outlook for the yen and Nikkei.

All this was needed to fine-tune the precise timing of the shock Chinese announcement to drop Kuruma for SGT. It was also needed to put the sheer scale of the announcement into its true global context, so that press releases and speeches could be drafted for clearance with Sool, and later the Chinese. Blake constantly had to keep reminding himself, and his team, that the objective of the whole exercise was not – as it would normally be – to maximise the benefit to his client's business, SGT. It was simply to maximise the damage to Japan and its stock market. This was all that interested Sool Kay-Sheen.

One of the biggest practical challenges was going to be persuading Sool to follow his advice. From bitter experience he knew how difficult it was to get Asians to see the importance of keeping to a brief and preparing properly. The problems had already started. Blake had commissioned a VNR – a video news release to be issued free to the broadcast media on the big day. For a cost of around £30,000, a good VNR can generate literally millions of pounds' worth of fairly controlled 'free' TV coverage worldwide, from a twenty-four-hour, often under-funded industry that consumes pictures as its oxygen of life. Sool, however, was not clearing the outline treatment to deadline, and was so far refusing to go through media training.

It was time to get heavy. Blake knew he was going to be judged entirely on the media coverage and attendant market impact of the Chinese announcement. There would be no second chances The Nikkei 225 either slumped temporarily, or it did not. It was as simple as that. Nowhere to hide. No excuses, 'buts' or 'if onlys', and he was not going to let Sool's media autism or pig-headedness get in the way of Globecom doing a good job.

Sool was now in New York. Before calling he made a list of the points he wanted to raise. Keep it all simple, unambiguous and non-negotiable. All very Anglo-Saxon, and very un-Korean. But time was too short for cultural niceties

The phone rang and rang. He was on the point of hanging up when at last it was answered.

'Yes?' Her voice was subdued.

'Jane! Hi! It's me. John.' Blake's spirits rose.

'He's not here.'

Something was wrong. Her tone, her reaction to him screamed

it. 'I was hoping to get you anyhow. What is it? This doesn't sound like the Jane I know.'

She began to breathe hard, as if hyper-ventilating and emotional. It was just a few seconds, but it seemed like minutes before she could speak properly. 'The bastard hit me again. I don't mean the sex thing. He really hit me. I'm out of here. I'm packing.'

'He did what . . .? Why? Tell me. Tell me what happened.' Blake was suddenly afraid that Sool had somehow found out about their relationship. Fear for his own skin was predominant before he checked himself and thought instead of Jane. It had been the instinctive, mean reaction of a wholly self-centred person, and one he would remember and think about later.

'It was about nothing. Some crap about me being untidy. But it was just an excuse to slap me about like one of his goons I'm not hurt. But I'm sure as hell mad,' she said, a little calmer now 'He's strung out, and getting worse. Well, I don't have to take it. I don't need him any more. I don't need anyone. I'm gone.'

Blake was worried again, but for different if no less selfish reasons. Sool was already going to prove difficult enough to manage, without Jane walking out and humiliating him in front of his entourage He heard himself saying, 'Are you sure now's the right time? Are you still OK for Milan? Let's really talk then.'

'Are you thinking about me. Or your damn press conference?'

The arrow hit its thick-skinned mark. 'Do you have his Sat-phone there?' He knew that Sool never travelled without the special black Samsonite briefcase containing the £10,000 Atlas SP 1600B German-made satellite phone. A scrambler had been fitted to it, making electronic eavesdropping virtually impossible.

'Sure. It's right here.'

'Good. Hang up and go outside to the terrace. I'll call you back.'

A few minutes later they were speaking again, with the distinctive half-second delay as their voices bounced 44,000 miles to and from one of the four Inmar satellites.

'Why this?' she asked, slightly irritated.

'We have to assume your phone, *all* your phones, wherever you are, may be tapped by Sool,' he said curtly. 'And we have to make even this short. Look, you asked me what I was worried about You or the conference. And the honest answer is, both. Because for the next ten to fourteen days they're all mixed up together. I

want you to leave him. It drives me crazy thinking of the two of you still together But believe me, he's going to be very dangerous, very unpredictable over the next week or so. You don't know half of what's happening. But basically he's about to bet the whole corporation on two spins of the wheel. The first one hours from now. Now is not a good time to provoke him. Believe me. Let's talk in Milan. We'll get you out right after this Hong Kong thing.'

She was quiet for a time before replying 'You think I could be in real danger?'

'I do. I mean, he's slapped you about again. You've been living with that kind of thing for a few months now. You told me. Some men get off on beating up their women. But Sool's capable of much worse than that. You know him better than I do. But that's what I think.'

Jane had not been prepared for all this, but she knew that Blake was right. Never before had she seen Sool so wound up and intense. 'OK OK,' she said at last. 'I'll stay for a bit longer, and try to keep out of his way But you make sure you get out to Milan. Don't let me down. You hear?'

'I hear,' he replied, relieved. 'Not much longer now. Then we'll talk about the future. I could get used to having you around, you know.'

'Sure you could,' she said, too cynically for his liking, and hung up.

11

Derivatives have become the bogeymen of the financial markets Outstanding contracts are worth trillions of dollars, and Jeremiahs in the media regularly predict that they may one day soon cause a meltdown, a complete seizure of world banking and big business.

It is not hard to see why this fear has arisen. Cumulative losses on derivatives have totalled well over $6 billion since 1986. But it was the Baring Brothers crash that put derivatives firmly in the dock when, in 1995, young trader Nick Leeson was involved in disastrous Nikkei 225 futures and options transactions, losing over £825 million in the Japanese stock market. And this was followed soon after by reports of a billion-dollar trading loss at Daiwa Bank's operation in New York.

Sool was making a long phone call, leaving Park standing with the MD of their own financial house, SGT Capital, in the Wall Street trading room. It was ten in the evening in New York, and the international digital wall clock for Tokyo showed noon. 'I still find derivatives hard to understand,' Park confessed. 'One moment I think I follow them. And the next I'm confused.'

'They are much misunderstood,' the MD agreed. 'A derivative is in reality a simple financial product designed to reduce and hedge against risk. A contract between two parties based on – *derived* from – the future value of whatever asset is involved. They are nothing new. Forward contracts were widely used by seventeenth-century Japanese traders to agree on the future price of rice Futures contracts are very similar, but can actually be traded – bought and sold by open cry in exchange pits. They are legally binding agreements to make or take delivery of the chosen financial instrument at a future date and price.

'One of the other commonly used derivatives are option contracts. These work in a similar way to forward and futures contracts, but with one very big difference If the rate agreed turns out to be disadvantageous to the client – be it a buy (call) or sell (put) – then they can refuse to take it up. It's just another form of insurance – taken out, of course, at a cost.'

'But what we're doing is not simply hedging,' Park pressed. He was worried that he still could not fully grasp what the Chairman was doing, although he knew it was risky.

The MD was showing his nervousness, and in a coded way his deep professional disapproval of treasury speculation. 'No. Derivatives can also be used to . . . gamble.' He almost spat the word out, and then blanched as he saw Sool striding back towards them and taking his seat. His frightened eyes pleaded with Park not to pass on his feelings.

His MD might be nervous, but fear had drenched in sweat the unfortunate trader selected to have Sool sit with him, despite the fierce air conditioning – it was company policy to keep it high to make the traders uncomfortable and alert. Having the founder chairman sitting alongside was an extraordinary thing for the young man. He was well used to extreme pressure as a trader – but this was off the scale.

In front of them was a bank of screens. They were mostly watching the Reuters`pages of option prices, and alternately the Bloomberg and Telerate services Also at his station were trading screens, a personal PC, a calculator and a touch-button twenty line telephone system, with lights that flashed the first three 'rings' before the audible tone cut in. His open line squawk box was for once fairly quiet, as if it also felt cowed by Sool's presence.

Sool was keeping himself in check. He wanted to do something,

but for once in his life he had to be passive. It was now all outside his control. His company, his life's creation, was in the hands of the world's faceless money markets. Two weeks earlier he had instructed the shell-shocked MD to use the corporation's credit line heavily to buy futures contracts in the Nikkei 225 and in Kuruma Motors stock. Dutifully – if reluctantly – he had instructed SGT's brokers accordingly, so that when the market shot up on the eagerly awaited Chinese announcement, they would make a killing on the margin Sool was now relying on the news to move the market, pushing the Nikkei 225 up by at least 1,200 points, over 5 per cent, making him a profit of over $100 million.

Then after the announcement, and profit taking, they would three or four days later begin to sell the Nikkei 225 and Kuruma stock short, and buy OTC put options on the expectation of a dramatic 15 per cent fall two weeks later, when the Kuruma outline agreement was revoked in favour of SGT. Volatile markets always react more strongly to bad news than good and it was part of Globecom's brief to encourage this through media and analyst comment. If everything went to plan, the trades would earn Sool over half a billion dollars. This would be used in a late submitted tender price to the Chinese immediately after the first Kuruma announcement, presenting them with an offer they could not afford to reject.

The MD knew the bare minimum about the Chinese deal He had been told only as much as he needed to know to do his job. The first thing he had done was to trawl the records to try to find parallels with what Sool was trying to achieve. One comparable he found had been back in June 1995. Share prices in Tokyo had fallen over 2 per cent to their lowest level for three years immediately after the announcement by the Governor of Tokyo cancelling the huge and prestigious World City Expo '96 This was a United Nations-supported event intended to last two hundred days, and had involved massive public and private-sector investment, along with great Japanese prestige around the world The Nikkei 225 had plummeted 470 points, before recovering slightly to 326 18 on the previous day's close. The long anticipated Chinese contract news was economically and politically far more significant, however, and would have greater impact than this. A stronger parallel in terms of scale perhaps was the effect of the Kobe earthquake on the markets in January 1995, when the Nikkei 225 fell by 1000 points in a day. The targets looked achievable, he had been able to report to Sool.

'Where will news appear first?' Sool asked, keeping his voice and eyes calm, hands flat on his knees.

'Here Chairman. Here.' The sweat was now trickling down the trader's back as he pointed to the Bloomberg news monitor. He needed a cigarette, and he needed a beer – but both would have to wait.

Sool said nothing for a while; the trading room was eerily quiet. 'I think our Japanese friends will get a surprise, ha?' he said eventually, talking to the young man almost as if he were an equal.

'I think so!'

The Telerate screen suddenly flashed with news from Kuala Lumpur of a disease affecting the rubber crop They both craned forward, and then relaxed.

'I think the days of Japan and its power are over. Ha?'

'Yes, Chairman. Definitely over. They have many problems.'

The same monitor then put up news about a hurricane heading for Florida. It suddenly reminded Sool of his biggest nightmare concerning the deal. Some unexpected natural or man-made disaster hitting Japan and depressing the Nikkei, despite the Kuruma announcement. Something like that Southern Hyogo earthquake, or the Aum Shinrikyo cult nerve-gas attack on Tokyo's subway which had killed twelve, also in '95. All his careful planning was, he knew, always at the mercy of the unexpected.

'Chairman! There. Look!'

The screen was now flashing a news story. *The* story.

'The People's Republic of China has announced outline contractual agreement with Kuruma Motors of Japan to design and manufacture its family car, due to go into production from 1999. Kuruma won the fiercely contested tender from other front-runners thought to include both Porsche and Mercedes of Germany and GM of America. Under the deal, no additional car production facilities will be licensed in China for a ten-year period, giving Kuruma the potential to supply the lion's share of the entire burgeoning Chinese market, worth conservatively $1.2 billion a year by the beginning of the millennium. Additional export markets for the so-called people's car will include India and South America. The news is also expected to boost the earnings prospects for Kuruma's traditional Japanese suppliers and contractors. Most importantly it confirms the special trading relationship between China and Japan, which many had feared was under threat.'

Sool clenched his fists, breathing rapidly. 'Show me! Show me!'

The trader tapped his Reuters screen with a pen, pointing to the luminous green figures of the December Nikkei 225 futures contract on the Osaka Securities Exchange. It stayed still, pulsing for a few agonising seconds. And then it began to move as the market digested the news. Slowly at first. Then firmly, inexorably up and up.

He had done it! It *was* all going exactly to plan.

Trent? I want a meet.'

It was the NYPD lieutenant 'You've got the polygraph report?'

'This is unofficial. You want a coffee some place or not?'

They met at the Fifth Avenue entrance to central Park, by the horse carriages, and walked aimlessly among the autumnal trees. New York wears her seasons well, for a city. All except summer.

For a lieutenant he dressed well. His grey topcoat, like his charcoal flannel suit, was of fashionably generous cut, and his expensive black leather brogues gave him an understated *style Anglais* class. Trent had no interest in clothes, and dressed more or less in whatever Fuji bought him. He wondered whether the man was on the take, but relaxed a little when he noticed his cheap plastic watch. Never trust a cop with a Rolex

After some small-talk about New York, politicians and sport, they found themselves by the skating rink, drawn by the music. As usual among all the earnest triers there was one skater who stood out. By coincidence she was a teenage Oriental, drifting effortlessly and with the poise and grace of a professional.

The irony was not lost on them. 'I watched the tape,' the NYPD man said, leaning on the railings, looking into the rink 'We're still having experts give us a view.'

'A view on what?'

'On whether it's real. Or latex, stage blood and animal guts.'

Trent snorted. 'Play it again, Sam. The old story. Does snuff porn really exist? Is it all a myth? Everyone has a friend who's seen one, but you never get a credible source. Is that it? Is that really what you're saying?'

The debate about whether snuff movies exist outside popular legend has raged for years. The stories – and the term snuff films – began in 1969 with rumours that Charles Manson or his followers had filmed the Tate-La Bianca murders around Los Angeles. But

until now – until the Fort Worth tape – there had never been official confirmation from any of the enforcement agencies in the USA, Europe or in Asia of their existence.

'You've seen the thing. Don't tell me you don't believe it. Don't tell me that.'

'There have been other real well-made fakes – *Man behind the Sun 731*, *Vampira* And *Guinea Pig* – a Japanese film where a man in a samurai costume dismembers a girl. That seemed so real a movie actor reported it to you guys in the Bureau. And that was someone who knows a hell of a lot more than you or me about what Hollywood make-up artists and technicians can do.'

'Yeah, yeah I read up on all of that. I've worked with the LAPD vice squad And with the Bureau's cult specialists at our academy in Quantico. So I know all about fakes. OK?'

They watched the skaters in silence for a while.

'And you're married to a Japanese,' the policeman said, keeping a neutral matter-of-fact tone in his voice.

Trent turned on him angrily. 'An *American* Japanese. And what the hell does that have to do with anything?'

'Back off, Trent. I'm not getting on your case. But it's known. All right? It's known you've got a thing about this enquiry. There are five murders a day in New York. Things are improving here, but there are over twenty thousand in the country a year, nine thousand of them unsolved. And you go crazy about eight. All involving Japanese girls. Come on!'

'And that's bad?'

'No, it's not bad. But I need to know where you're coming from. You planted that tape on Pangalos – on *my* raid and with *my* officers present. And then you spring that polygraph stunt. I'm here to say, level with me. I need to know whether you've gone over the edge on this. Or whether you're just a regular guy like the rest of us, trying to close a case.' They started walking again. 'Look. I also had one like this a couple of years ago. A homicide Someone butchered a young mother and her kid. She looked real like my sister, you know? Anyway, it got to me more than most. Always will. We still haven't caught anyone.'

Trent could see the man was on edge, not wanting to show emotion in front of a relative stranger. 'What does the polygraph show?'

'You know it. Pangalos had watched that movie. Your gamble paid off.'

'Pity we still can't use this stuff in court.'

'Yeah. But *we'll* use it. The smart lawyer's already a lot less cocky. Pangalos might even plea-bargain. Who knows. But why's it all such a big deal to you?'

Trent told him more of his suspicions about Sool Kay-Sheen, and how the deliveries by Pangalos to Trump Tower were the only thread linking him to the tapes. And the killings. 'But you know what I really can't figure?' he added. 'The Japanese. I mean, we get heat from the embassy if the chairman of Sony so much as gets a parking ticket here. But here we have eight young Japanese girls dead, mostly visiting Japanese nationals – and nothing. No heat. No real co-operation even on our investigations, about the victims and their families. Weird.'

'Maybe that's where you should start looking. That is strange.'

'It's on my list already. But maybe – just maybe – it's going to end soon, as suddenly as it began. It's two months since the last girl disappeared.'

The NYPD man stopped walking and looked at him.

'I wish it were. But it's more like two days.' He jerked his head towards the Essex House across the road. 'There's been another suspected abduction.'

'Oh dear God, no ' Trent closed his eyes, frowning 'Japanese?'

'Japanese. And Trent . . . You don't seem any more crazy than the rest of us. You want help? By the book? Outside the book? You got it.'

Jane was waiting in the Royalton for her girlfriend as arranged. Beautiful, slim young men drifted past, waiters dressed all in black, carrying trays of tall, cool flutes of champagne, Campari sodas and exotic beers. It would have been so easy, so natural, to order a Stolichnaya. Just a wave of a hand and she could once more kiss her only real friend full on the lips, and feel him deep inside her. How she missed him, despite the fragile pride of a recovering alcoholic. She lit a cigarette, but that just made it worse. Where once a drink had made her crave for a cigarette, now a smoke made her yearn for the smooth, cool vodka and that glow it gave.

Clara arrived just in time. The Royalton, on West 44th Street, still New York's most fashionable hotel for the affluent young, was always busy as a meeting place in the early evenings, and she had to peer through the designer gloom before spotting Jane sitting

in the long lobby bar on a large white canvas sofa. She waved, fought her way through the crush, past reception on the right, and they kissed flamboyantly, pleased to see each other. Somehow she caught the eye of a waiter, an acquired art in this place, and ordered two Evians without even asking Jane what she wanted

Clara was also a model. Her father – long gone – was a dark-skinned Creole hustler from New Orleans, and her mother old money, white, descended from the original French colonial settlers at nearby Baton Rouge, the capital of Louisiana. With that cocktail of stock Clara had a good chance of looking something special, and had not disappointed – tall, coffee-skinned, with the kind of natural elegance no amount of ballet lessons could teach, black, naturally curled hair, and wide-apart liquid brown eyes. She was in one of her 'I'm a model dressing down' outfits.

She always reminded Jane of Milan, and now Milan made her think excitedly about her assignation there with Blake in a couple of days' time. The two women had met twelve years earlier at one of Riccardo Gay's Tartuffo Nepenta Club nights, the traditional way in Milan to launch the collection season. They had been young, green models, on their first visit to Europe, and easy prey for all the playboys and bogus agents. Later, and wiser, they had both joined Elite, the world's largest model agency.

'How's Annie?' Jane asked. Clara was one of her many gay friends, and most of them now seemed to be in stable relationships.

'Annie's Annie.' Which meant that the slightly older woman was still bossy and dismissive of the girlie-girlie world of Clara's career. But then, a typical night in Emergency at Bellevue Medical Center was enough to harden anyone. 'And how's you? You look tired.'

The Evians arrived and Jane fussed with the glass as she poured half the bottle. 'Oh, I'm feeling . . . Well, you know. We've talked about it all before.'

'Oh, sure. Here we go Your looks are fading. Your liver's probably in terminal decline. Modelling sucks. And your biological clock's ticking away towards a barren midnight.'

Jane had to smile· Clara knew her so well. 'Yeah, yeah. Then *you* say, poor little rich girl. You're still gorgeous. The world's my lobster. And I should try serving franks and fries for a living before complaining. Yeah, yeah, yeah . .'

They laughed, but Clara could sense there was something new adding to Jane's normal catalogue of real problems and perceived

neuroses. 'Is it Sool?' she asked. 'I told you a million times already. He's a creep. A misogynist creep. And maybe something worse.'

Jane decided against telling her about the beating. 'I know. It's not been working for a while, and I *will* get out of it. Real soon. But whatever he's become, he did help me a lot. I won't forget that.'

Clara looked at her kindly. 'You know something? "This world was never made for one as beautiful as you."'

'Sure. "They're not listening. They don't know how."'

'"Perhaps they'll listen now!"' they sang, and giggled out loud in unison, hugging each other and attracting a few curious stares from neighbouring groups.

Then they were quiet for a while, good enough friends not to have to fill every silence. The Royalton was now becoming busy. The intimate small bar, hidden to the right of the entrance, was full, and people were cruising up and down the lobby looking for places. It irritated the hell out of the hotel's paying guests that they could not even get a place to sit and drink for their $300 a night. A familiar face turned a few heads – a rock star or tennis player, Jane could not remember which.

'When I'm out of this thing with Sool, I'm going to do something new.'

'Such as?'

'I don't know exactly. Something so I can escape the Creature.' The Creature was her name for the other person she became in front of the camera. She could strike a simple pose and there it was – the Creature. Self-confident, fun, sassy, anything they wanted her to be. She had heard opera singers talk in the same sort of third party way about their voices. 'I need a change. Something real. Earthy. You know? Ranching. Farming. Forestry. That stuff. Canada maybe. I used to love camp as a kid. Grape juice. All that. Racoons knocking over trash cans. Swimming in ice-cold Connecticut lakes . . .'

'And jerking off that summer's date from the boys' camp.'

'I wish! I was such a prude as a kid. Too pretty to be asked out much, and too shy to encourage anyone.'

'A Barbie with no Ken. You're breaking my heart. So, is there anyone else? A new man to share this lumberjack world of yours?'

Jane thought of Blake before saying 'no' a bit too quickly. A PR suit hardly fitted into the Robert Frost dreamland she had just conjured up. She *would* like to escape. It was more Gauguin than the Van Gogh they had just sung about. But what she really needed was

to escape the Creature, with someone who cared zip about looks, and was immune to the Creature's guile and fatal attraction. Blake was cynical enough about image and packaging, and she liked that in him He seemed just as trapped in his phoney world as she was in hers. There were trace elements of something good that might develop, but for the moment she wanted to leave it in her peripheral vision, afraid that any attempt at examination and analysis would frighten it away. Milan was going to be important.

'And what's the story in the sack these days?' Clara was embarrassingly open with details of her own sex life, and expected nothing less from her friends.

'Oh, it's been separate rooms since Tuesday, the last night in Vegas.'

'Why's that?' Clara's eyes widened further, fired with prurience

Jane blushed again, leaned forward and said in a whisper, 'He tried to do . . . You know – that.'

Clara nearly choked on her water, and let rip one of her loud barks of raucous laughter. It stopped one of the Royalton's beautiful boys in his track alongside them. 'Waiter!' she called theatrically. 'This woman needs another drink, with a double twist of lime Her boyfriend tried to put it THERE '

The two girls collapsed into fits of high-school giggles, hugging each other, as the serious-looking waiter shot off like a startled deer.

The male suicide rate in the UK is rising fast. One man in every five thousand aged between thirty five and forty-four now kills himself. Among women the rate has halved since 1982, with men now four times as likely to take their own lives as women. The only other country that mirrors this is the USA. And men seem to mean business. They gas or hang themselves more, rather than taking pills, which allows some chance of rescue and recovery.

The reasons are complex, and tied in with the macho problem men have in not expressing their emotions. But one indisputable statistic also casts its long, accusing shadow. Jobless men are three times more likely to kill themselves as those in work.

Mavis Lilley had promised to keep a space by her for Miss Wilkins in the front pew of the half-full north London church. The ten days since Ian's death had flown by. When she arrived, ten minutes early, the widow was already there, surrounded by

family and friends. She was pleased to see sitting behind Mavis Sir Lucien with Jamie MacIntyre, the old Chiasmus MD, forced out by Mann. As she walked down the aisle, she felt the eyes of her old colleagues follow her as she made her obeisance, spoke briefly to Mavis, smiled warmly at the two old friends behind, and then knelt in private prayer. One person watching would she knew be David Mann, but she had deliberately avoided looking around her too widely, not wanting to catch anyone else's eye. This was poor Ian's funeral, not an office reunion.

An excellent organist and choir were performing the 'Pie Jesu' from Fauré's *Requiem*, and Mavis was silently weeping to the sublime music. Ian's coffin lay behind the Victorian screen in the choir area He was to be buried, not cremated – something of which he had always had a horror.

From her visit the week before with Mavis, she had learned that Ian had been suffering from depression – anhedonia, which made him feel despondent, irritable, indecisive and always exhausted. He had been prescribed powerful anti-depressants, most recently Prozac, and would soon have been starting a course of counselling. Mavis had known nothing of all this until the inquest. She had not even known he was out of work. The man had simply bottled everything up for as long as he humanly could. Until it finally all became unbearable – or perhaps suddenly so utterly pointless

Ian's elder brother bore a strong family resemblance, and Miss Wilkins was startled when he went forward to make his awkward, tongue-tied eulogy. It was full of talk of family seaside outings, tadpoles in jam jars, school cricket and, of course, Ian's love for Mavis.

The elderly vicar, however, was far from tongue-tied in his thundering sermon condemning modern business life and ethics – echoing comments made by the coroner at the previous week's inquest. He concluded, 'The engines of capitalism are now being fired by the flames of Hell. And modern business, at the *fin de siècle*, may have become the anti-Christ. That enemy which our early church expected to see appear before the end of the world.

'We have just read together the powerful Psalm 73. About the prosperity of the ungodly. The ungodly have always been with us, flaunting their temporal power and riches. But seldom in history has the political system actually promoted greed as the dominant creed for society. As an aspiration for the young. But

Pericles of Athens, writing in 430 BC, said, "Although only a few may originate a policy, we are all able to judge it." Well not only are *we* able to judge the policies of big business and its corporate bulimia – sicking up human life fashionably to slim down. One much greater and more terrible than us will also judge its leaders. I have no hesitation in saying that the cause of Ian's death was not a disturbed mind. It was losing his job that really killed him. I will pray, as we all should, for the forgiveness of those involved. May God forgive them.'

There were audible gasps and murmurings around the church. A few were outraged. Most wholeheartedly agreed, especially the Chiasmus people, who seemed the most animated of all. Miss Wilkins turned around to look back at the congregation. She located David Mann on the opposite side of the aisle, head hung, staring at the order-of-service sheet that was shaking in his hand. By sheer force of will she somehow lifted his eyes up to look directly into her own. She locked on to them imperiously, before sharply turning her back with a symbolism that was not lost on him.

Moscow's gangsters are averaging thirty to thirty-five bankers and businessmen a year, as well as ten politicians and media people and scores of each other. In the USA, $2000 is the going rate among the drug world low-life for a contract murder. In Moscow it is simply part of the job description. The mobsters are crude and turn their hand to anything – protection (especially of newly established Western sales offices), prostitution, evicting legitimate tenants, old people and others from rent stabilised apartments, and drugs. A term some use to describe them is *shavki*, meaning scavenging mongrels. Many are ex army, from Afghanistan and more recently the Chechen war, ex-Interior Ministry special forces, like the élite rapid reaction force, the ironically acronymed SOBR.

They fear little, except perhaps each other and the OMON, the capital's awesome anti-insurgency troops. But mostly they stick to their own territories, knowing that the OMON, and the equally formidable special force of the re-formed KGB, the Federal Security Service, the FSB, despite their political mandate to fight organised crime, are hopelessly stretched. The fact is that the criminal mobs of Moscow are seriously out of control.

Yuri Dzerzhinsky was as near to a typical modern Moscow mobster as you could find. Twenty-eight, he had defected from

SOBR whilst on a tour of duty three years earlier in Grozny. He had been hit in the arm by a Chechen sniper one night. Although not a serious wound, it had been for him the last straw. Six inches further to the right and the bullet would have been in his heart. During a short spell of leave he bribed and bummed his way back to Moscow, then disappeared. He had risked a couple of snatched meetings with his mother just twice since then. The internal security services were now so swamped he knew that surveillance on the mother of a low-grade defector was very unlikely, but he was careful nonetheless That apart, he had begun a new life in the only trade he knew. Threatening life.

His beer in the Hotel National ground floor conservatory bar had been served by a young waiter, earnest and smart in his green jacket. The sprinkling of classy hard-currency hookers in the place had taken Dzerzhinsky in as alone, attractive, and above all rich-looking. Dollars could buy just about anyone in Moscow, including Dzerzhinsky himself.

Park Chang-Hyun had arrived in Moscow from New York only two days before, and now, having watched Dzerzhinsky go into the plant festooned bar, he satisfied himself by matching the description – medium height, thinning dark hair, and thick full-face beard. For a Russian, he would also be sharply dressed. Yes, this was the man described to him by the on-the-take FSB officer as the most professional of the smaller mobsters. And the least unreliable. The FSB had a successful reputation for fighting serious crime, and as a result its very few corrupt officers were the best source of information on how to find efficient underworld services. Dzerzhinsky had been the first recommendation. If he was himself still alive at the time of the contract, it would happen.

'Give this to the man, please. With the beard. Do not point me out or describe me to him. A hundred dollars. OK?' he said from the entrance to the lobby, well out of sight of Dzerzhinsky.

The brilliantined waiter could not believe his luck. A hundred dollars was serious money. 'That's all I do? Give that man this package?' His English had the usual American influence of pop records and movies.

'No, no! That is *not* all you do. You also forget me and my Asian face.' His eyes hardened and he held the man's arm so hard he blanched in pain. 'Because if not, if you remember me to anyone, then I will remember you, and your wife, Galena Kukk. And your

apartment on Petrovosky Boulevard. And your child, Valentin. You understand? You really understand?'

Afraid now, the light in his eyes went out, and he shook his arm free. Taking the envelope, and the dollars, he turned and walked directly to Dzerzhinsky.

'I am to give you this,' he said softly, and then walked away before the man could ask him anything.

He need not have worried. Dzerzhinsky had no interest in where the package came from. All that mattered was that it contained the $200,000, the air ticket to Tokyo, and precise instructions on where to bomb and when. Sliding it inside his topcoat pocket, he downed his beer and looked over at the bargirl he had found most attractive. She was a shapely bottle-blonde Monroe wannabe. He knew his addiction to sex with Moscow's famously gorgeous up-market prostitutes amounted to a death wish, given the explosion of AIDS in the capital. But an addiction it was, and he averaged two or three a week. He had never expected to live long and, although he had never been tested, he knew he was by now almost certainly HIV positive. With the slightest of nods towards her, he got up and left. One minute later, to the sour looks of her fellow professionals, she slid off the garden-style white wooden chair, pressed down her short yellow dress with the flat of her hands, threw her fur over her shoulder, and sashayed out expertly on her four-inch pencil heels.

He had arranged to meet her by Leonardo da Vinci at twelve. The plane had been late landing at a rainy Milano Linate, and the coach taking them to the terminal had dawdled maddeningly, maliciously, as if it knew he was late. The yellow cab at least was driven by a fellow motor racing enthusiast, and they spent the half-hour journey comparing the merits of today's drivers with the likes of Fangio and Moss, Blake's fluent Italian impressing the older man. Road works and the usual Milanesè traffic all conspired against them, and it was almost 12 30 before the car screeched to a stop outside La Scala.

But there she was, dwarfed under a man-sized hotel umbrella by the statue, waiting for him. She was wearing a white belted Jaeger raincoat and a head-scarf – the classless, classy bonnet of queens and cleaners alike. The wind was gusting across the Piazza della Scala, forcing her to look away from where the cab had dropped him, by the rank Crossing towards her, he crept under the back of

the brolly, put his overnight bag down, and tapped her gently on the shoulder. As she turned, he took her by the waist and peppered kisses all over her wet upturned face before his lips finally found hers. The kiss was long, loving and immediately answered all the doubts each had faced before making the journey. Happily, mercifully, it felt just as it had on that last morning a week ago in Las Vegas.

'Hello, you,' he said at last, smiling foolishly.

'Hello, *wet* me.' She smiled back one of her dazzling Creature smiles, knowing exactly its effect.

'I know a place with a roof,' he replied, utterly captivated once more by her mesmeric beauty.

They ran hand in hand across the square, south from the opera house and into the tall glass arcades of old shops and restaurants. At the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II, just by the Duoma Square, was a bar Blake always liked to visit. Looking on to the cathedral, and with the flow of the bustling arcade crowds, it was a marvellous place to nurse a Campari, enjoy a cigar and watch the world go by.

Finding a table, he ordered her Pellegrino, his own habitual Campari soda, and lit the Partagas Lonsdale bought from the cigar shop he knew in the arcade. He looked around to make sure he was not annoying anyone. Their nearest neighbours, however, were two young Japanese couples, tourists, all of whom were smoking Muratti cigarettes. 'I should have asked you,' he said apologetically to Jane 'Are you happy with this?'

'Sure. Go ahead I like the smell of a fine cigar. Reminds me of my grandpa's old stogies,' she said. 'And so Tell me. How's it all going with SGT?'

'This is all the "shop" we're going to talk. But – pretty good so far. The markets behaved themselves last Thursday. The Nikkei rose nicely on the Chinese Kuruma Motors news Things are going to plan,' he replied, without showing much enthusiasm.

'You don't sound too sure. You don't like all of this, do you?'

'I never like "Plan A" if I don't know "Plan B". Life isn't black and white, complete successes or complete failures. In my business, if seventy five per cent of a campaign goes exactly to plan, that's pretty damned good. PR is powerful only because people know it's not as controllable as, say, a paid-for advertising campaign. With ads you can communicate what you want, to whom you want, when you want. But people know it's paid for and look at

your message with a healthy dose of scepticism. In PR, you have to work through the filter of, say, a journalist's or analyst's pen – a respected independent third party. This is much more credible. But there are no guarantees that it'll happen at all. Or happen right if it does.'

'And for whatever you're doing for SGT, you need both. Right? Guaranteed and controllable coverage.'

'That's pretty much it. Damage limitation is virtually non-existent in this situation. It either goes very right, or it doesn't go at all.'

'Sure,' she said, then after a brief pause added, 'So what drives you, John Blake? Money? Someone special? I mean, you're not married or anything?'

He laughed uncomfortably, put completely off his stride by her directness. 'No. Well, not any more.'

'You're divorced?'

'Yes.'

She thought for a moment. 'What happened? I mean, none of my business and everything, but . . .'

'We had a kid. But she died. A hole in the heart from birth. She was just three. After that Louise changed. We both did. Instead of helping each other get over things, instead of bringing us closer, we kind of went into ourselves. Especially me. I worked longer and longer hours, and travelled more. Deliberately. I can see that now. We split as well as people can. Just about friends at first. But we don't stay in touch now.'

'What's she like?'

'She's like someone who deserved better.'

'I want a mental image. Describe her.'

'Striking. Pale. Fair. A little sharp-featured. People said she looked a little like Meryl Streep.' He was pleased she was asking. It meant she had been thinking about him.

'Meryl Streep doesn't look like Meryl Streep any more,' she replied, a little hardness unaccountably in her voice – annoyed perhaps that he was still speaking well of his ex-wife.

'I suppose not,' he said, puzzled and thrown off balance as before by her sudden mood swings. 'What about you? Have you ever married?'

She looked at him directly with the turquoise eyes, as if challenging him. 'I've lived with a few guys, before Sool. But never really got close to marrying. That seems the way it is

for a lot of the top models. I think we frighten the nice guys off.'

'Well, you don't frighten me.'

'Perhaps you're not a nice guy.'

He pulled on the Partagas, savouring the rich, complex flavours of cedar, leather and coffee, but thinking not for the first time that Campari and good cigars make poor companions. Jane was certainly difficult to read. A bit flakey in many ways. But he found the combination of beauty with a wing down irresistible. 'You wouldn't know what to do with a nice guy,' he teased. 'You're too strong a woman for a spaniel-eyed lap-dog. But you deserve better than what you've got. You need someone else in your corner.'

'You?' The hard edge was still there, ready to protect her from the rejection she had come to expect.

He leaned over to her, putting his hands to her face. 'Me,' he said, looking deeply into the Lorelei eyes. 'Where are you staying?' he asked.

'The usual. The Four Seasons.'

'Mine's even nearer. Just across the square. And I suddenly think we should leave here, and go to my room, before I get us arrested. I've never wanted to make love to anyone as badly as I do to you. Right now. I want you so much I ache.'

The urgent need for sex between two people can be obvious to all around. It was unmistakable to the waiter as they hurriedly paid and left, arms about each other. It was blatant to the priest they passed crossing the Piazza del Duomo. It was obvious to the hotel receptionist as Blake checked in. And it was ecstasy as they made hurried, noisy, frenzied, selfish love fully clothed on the bed the minute they were in the room.

This time they did have coffee when they met. At a kosher place in the garment district, off 39th. The NYPD lieutenant was chewing on his second bagel.

'I don't know how you can eat those things,' Trent said. 'They digest like lead.'

A Hasidic at the next table heard this and threw him an angry look, as if not liking bagels was proof positive of anti-Semitism.

The police officer emptied his mouth with the help of a swig of coffee. 'Anything nationwide on Miss Ito?' he asked.

'Nothing. Except again the Japanese are being very sparing in the

information they'll give us about her. I think they know a whole lot more than they're saying. It must be political '

'Well, I have something for you. This came over my desk today.' He passed over a photocopy of a computer printout

Trent speed-read it It was a request from the LAPD for information on a New York City resident suspected of involvement in a hard-core film-making business in Southern California and Mexico 'So?'

'I spoke to the Vice Squad sergeant in control. He says this is a big-budget outfit, with at least one homicide suspect involved. The Department's Special Investigation Section has been keeping them under surveillance. And nobody's talking. Nobody. They seem highly disciplined, and that's unusual for this kind of sleazeball world.'

Trent nodded. With threats, offers of plea bargains and all the other tactics, they could normally lean on someone hard enough to make them inform This did indeed sound promising. 'And this New York guy?'

'That's the good news. He's known to do business with Pangalos. And the other Times Square hard porn people.'

Trent grinned widely. 'That's great news! I'll pick it up with our West Coast people.'

They got up to go. As they were parting outside the lieutenant bit on yet another leaden bagel and said, 'Watch your back on this one, Trent. Or you could end up with *real* lead in your gut. These people are tight. Organised. Not the usual crazies and jokers.'

'I know. And thanks.'

'Sure.'

12

Gerhard Richter gulped down the treacly strong black instant coffee. This was no time to feel sleepy. He needed to cram as much as he could into each and every day. His self-imposed countdown to the Helminth from Hell was ticking away, but he knew that he worked at his best when faced with a deadline.

What he had was a hacker's paradise. Almost unlimited direct – not remote – access to Chiasmus's mainframes as well as the local area network, with its powerful servers and work stations. In fact he was not really a hacker at all, having such hands-on access, and so many passwords and codes sloppily left around on pinboards and scribbled on Post-it stickers tacked to work stations.

Despite this it was far from easy. For some of the entry points he still did not have the passwords, and to find ways in had to use a software program that trawled an electronic dictionary and encyclopedia, plus a directory of place and people names. Despite training to the contrary, most people still choose passwords from the names of their partners, children or pets. 'Fred' is the most widely used in the UK. Among US companies there is a

more romantic mood, the favourite word being 'love', followed by 'sex'.

Once armed with all the access points he needed, Richter's plan was twofold. First he was going to plant simple logic bombs in Chiasmus's computers to be triggered at some pre-arranged time. Logic bombs are, in effect, simply a kind of deliberate mistake, designed to wipe out swathes of memory and send operations haywire.

Second, and most devastating of all, would be his 'worm' – the Helminth from Hell.

A worm is a small computer program. And a computer program is, at heart, simply a set of binary mathematical instructions. These are arranged into small pieces, that is packets of information, which are sent rapidly to their destinations, suitably addressed with codes Richter was designing the worm to simulate some of the instructions in the main operating system software. Once in, the worm could tunnel around until it met an instruction similar to itself, at which point it would either destroy it, or alter it at random. One of the ironies of the hugely complex new computer technologies is that they are actually easier for exceptionally sophisticated hackers to attack – that very complexity, once understood, itself opening new doors.

His flat was littered with computer printouts and disks, and with the detritus of his life. It was two thirty in the afternoon. Just a few more hours before he could be back at work on Chiasmus's computers. And just a few more days before the world would feel the full force of his artistry.

His train of thought was interrupted by the rasping of his doorbell. Scowling, he ignored it. Nobody he wanted to see ever came to his home. Logically, therefore, it was a mistake, or someone he did not want to see. Answering the door was therefore illogical The bell rang twice more, and then there came a loud and insistent knocking Furious, Richter got up from the bean-bag, stormed over to the door, and peered through the spyhole. To his horror he saw a uniformed police officer and another man.

'Mr Richter! Please open the door. Police!' barked one of the men.

Richter's mind swirled. Could it be something from his past hacking days? Or even Chiasmus? Maybe it was his last but one illegal money-making scam – the data encryption pirate decoders

he had created and sold to allow people to watch satellite pay-TV for free. Sheepishly he opened the door.

'Gerhard Richter?' the uniformed man asked.

Richter nodded. 'What is it? What do you want, please?'

'Gerhard Richter, I am arresting you for the offence of deception. You do not have to say anything, but if you do not mention now something which you later use in your defence, the court may decide that your failure to mention it strengthens the case against you A record will be made of anything you say and it may be given in evidence if you are brought to trial . . . Is that clear? Yes? Well, collect your coat. You are to accompany us to the station. Also you will observe that we have obtained a search warrant issued under Section 33 of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act '

'But why? What is this about?' Richter pleaded weakly

The detective constable looked at him with an amused eye, and shook his head. 'It's your money-making predictions game, son. It was your bad luck to have one of our retired deputy commissioners on your posh-people lists. He saw what was coming right from your first letter. We teach this scam at Fraud Squad training classes. It's as old as the hills.'

Richter tried to hide his relief. He did not care about his arrest, or the later consequences of a trial. All he wanted was to be able to free the Helminth. And that was certainly going to be something they did not teach rookie cops in training school. Nor would the plods searching his place for evidence on the predictions scam understand anything from all the evidence littered on his floor about his vampire worm and Chiasmus. Of that he was sure. Even he was at the limits of his understanding of the complicated programming.

'I have to put someone off I was meeting later. Can I make a call? Please?'

The DC said he could, and in seconds Richter had Miss Wilkins on the line. 'I can't see you tonight,' he said, his voice more strangulated than usual.

'Why ever not?' She had just returned from the funeral.

'I'm being arrested. Right now.'

Now it was her turn to sound alarmed. 'What for?'

'That prediction thing. They say it was illegal. I didn't know that.'

She thought rapidly. 'Gerhard, have you ever been arrested before? Do you have a criminal record?'

'No.'

She was audibly relieved. 'Very well. Try not to worry. I'll call my solicitor about bail. We'll have you out in no time. Promise, dear. Bye.'

Richter felt much happier, almost cocky again. He cut the connection and then dialled 100 for the operator.

'I said just one call,' the DC snapped.

'Oh, Operator. Have a nice day,' Richter said, and hung up. He knew, and the DC knew, that he had just wiped off the last-number redial facility that would have enabled the police to trace his call to Miss Wilkins.

The officer looked at him with fresh respect That was either quick thinking or the action of an experienced villain. He would have to find out which.

If a member of the FSB is on the take, it is highly likely that one of his customers will include a Western security service. The most likely candidate is the richest, the CIA. Or perhaps the most threatened, the BND, Germany's Bundesnachrichtendienst. In the case of Major Konon Petrov, Britain's MI6 had found him first. Fifteen years ago.

Petrov had been selling information for years. Information to him was a commodity like any other, and he used it just as generations of the upper middle class had used inside knowledge of company news and other market-sensitive information to underpin their unearned family fortunes. He diligently harvested information, and then sold it to the highest bidder. He had originally been a journalist working for Tass, the official Soviet news agency. When his boss had been made head of the KGB's International Information Department, he had taken Petrov with him, beginning his twenty-year career in intelligence work. The Department – set up by Brezhnev in March 1978 – was really concerned with disinformation, working alongside the traditional KGB disinformation section, Department A of the First Chief Directorate. Petrov's job was written or oral disinformation, false rumour, censorship, forgery and manipulation of all forms of media. His time as a 'journalist' with Tass had therefore proved to be an excellent induction.

In the new Russia, parts of the old KGB were in many respects reborn in the guise of the FSB Counter Intelligence Service. Under Yeltsin's mandate, the FSB had once again acquired the familiar

powers of arrest and detention at its own feared centres, along with general surveillance and phone-tapping, all without need of prior consent from court or parliament. It had a discreet, crack armed force and – working with the SVR Foreign Intelligence Service – was operating abroad. One of the principal reasons for the rise of the FSB, however, was the need felt by many in parliament to counter-balance the rising power of the President's ambitious presidential guard.

In order publicly to justify its increasing budget and influence, the FSB was presented as a major part of society's fight against organised crime, drugs, nuclear-materials smugglers and terrorism – mirroring exactly the stance being taken by leaders of British and American intelligence services in the post-recession, market-testing, 'peace dividend' era. And it was in this criminal area that Petrov had nurtured his most lucrative contracts, selling information on and to Moscow's mobsters and their international partners.

Virtually all the money paid to Petrov over the years – now approaching half a million pounds – was sitting in a numbered bank account in Liechtenstein. None had been used to enhance his modest lifestyle with his loving wife of twenty-two years and their sons. He had no drug habit to feed, he did not sleep around with the gorgeous young babes of Moscow, and had neither a dacha nor expensive car to support. Petrov had very early on seen what was happening to his country, accurately predicting the Gorbachev revolution and most of what followed with the break-up of the creaking Soviet Union. He realised that effectively the first two-thirds of his life had been claimed by the state, the illegal Bolshevik state that had bullied and blundered its way through since 1917. There was little anyone could do about it other than keep their own counsel and make the most of it. His long-cherished plan was to arrange things so that at least he could enjoy the last third of his life on his own terms. That meant money, and it meant getting out

In ten years' time – when he would be fifty-five – he was suddenly going to disappear, leaving behind his wife, family and friends for ever. The money would be used to fund a new life in Europe – preferably France. He figured he would be safest in the European Union with its Court of Human Rights, and its other bleeding-heart, liberal institutions. Under his new identity he would write, travel and maybe even resume his boyhood piano studies. The first thing he would buy would be a Bosendorfer concert grand.

If Peregrine Mitchell – himself staring at early retirement – did not have hard evidence of all this, he had long ago guessed at it He had in fact expected Petrov to disappear when he was fifty, and had put a watcher on him for the duration of that month, just in case. He also knew that Petrov had never really been a double agent for him, although he always claimed a political reason for supplying information to the British. This was just a posturing attempt at an insurance policy in case he was ever caught and needed a Gorbienko-style escape to the West. Petrov was in fact recognised as being just a hustler of any information that came his way. There was no political motivation, beyond hatred and resentment of the corrupt old butchers who had run the USSR. But he was utterly reliable, anxious to please and win repeat custom in order to increase his nest-egg.

The report on Mitchell's desk, therefore, made worrying reading. It had come from two related sources via the service's Moscow station. The first was from Petrov's case officer three days earlier, reporting his agreement to supply a young South Korean with information on a reliable contract killer. The second was from a watcher immediately put on the Korean, reporting on his apparent exchange of money and instructions in the Hotel National. The CIA station in Korea had run a check on the man and established that it was Park Chang-Hyun, someone who had spent his entire career working for SGT. He was Sool Kay-Sheen's closest aide. The same Park who had recruited Blake in Frankfurt.

This . . . The Japanese murders . . . So much, all so unrelated, but all leading back to the same man. Sool Kay-Sheen. But why? What was the link?

Also on Mitchell's desk was the latest summary of Sool's recent telephone and fax communications, supplied partly by the Americans and partly by the Government Communications Headquarters at Cheltenham. It showed little of interest beyond his business dealings around the world. On the other hand the code people had yet to unscramble his sophisticated mobile Sat-phone calls. All in all, pretty unsatisfactory for someone charged with preparing a report by that afternoon for the Cabinet Office Joint Intelligence Committee. The committee was itself charged with collating information supplied to it by MI5, MI6, GCHQ, the Defence Intelligence Staff and Special Branch for ministerial

briefings on matters that could affect British interests – be they military, paramilitary, criminal, economic or trade.

Mitchell looked down at the papers sourly. Based on the information he had, Sool Kay-Sheen could affect all these national interests. But it was a mess, and made no sense. His long experience told him that having seemingly too much information meant just one thing. You need even more so as to know what to ignore. It was time to play one of his few cards. Time to get someone on the inside of Sool's operations.

Picking up the phone, he spoke to his assistant. 'I want to know where John Blake is. And bring me in his file and number. It's Queen and Country time.'

Sool had flown home to Seoul for three days, planning to fly on to the Philippines, and then to Hong Kong – meeting Jane there. A change of plan. There was much to do back at the headquarters of SGT. Because of his Confucian, top-down, autocratic style of working, the divisional MDs ran their operational day-to-day businesses in consumer electronics, semi-conductors, ship-building and cars, but major strategic and financial decisions simply stacked up for Sool himself to handle.

The Polish shipyard deal? Wait for the chairman. Whether to badge or market SGT's own domestic multi-media package? Wait for the chairman. Should they move to production with the luxury sedan concept car that had been so well received at Geneva? Better wait for the chairman

Sool's approach to business was always the same. Say 'yes', but carefully hedge the risks He almost never said 'no' or 'maybe' to anything. In part this was because his research and development people by now intuitively knew what he liked and did not like. Most proposals that reached his desk had already passed the internal 'will the chairman like it?' test. Will it improve his *kibun*, his state of feeling good? In part positivism was simply a feature of his own 'can do' nature. He had a much greater fear of turning down a great idea than he had of making a mistake.

His *kibun* was most definitely not improved, however, by the MD of SGT Capital on their return home. The man was responsible for the treasury management of the vast capital and cash requirements of the various operating divisions – currencies, interest rates, debt and equity. The group had companies in sixteen countries and

did business with over thirty. Skilful management of, for example, currencies was vital. The wafer-thin margins in most markets meant that money management was frequently all there was between a profit and a loss. Especially for the Korean *chaebol*, which tended to price low to achieve market-share penetration and scale as rapidly as possible.

Despite this, the man had wanted to reduce, not increase, SGT's dependency on derivatives – if not for prudent hedging, then certainly for active speculation. The New York success had alarmed him. He believed that Sool was now even more likely to demand increased derivatives use for investment portfolio management.

It was against this background that, alone in Sool's office, he attempted to question the policy. In true Korean style he had initially praised Sool, rather than confronting him. He praised the foresight and astuteness of the New York success, but then – using emotional leverage rather than any kind of Western-style logical challenge – he had gone on also to praise Sool's bravery in risking the whole company. All the family that was SGT, its people and their dependants, would also praise Sool and share the pain, even if they lost their jobs and the company crashed. They would for ever admire his bravery.

Sool had become furious. There was now too much of the Westerner in him not to see the nervous coded challenge for exactly what it was, however disguised.

'Stand up!' he screamed.

The man rose from his chair, head hung low, hands stiffly at his sides, whilst Sool stormed out and rounded up half a dozen people at random from nearby offices. They stood awkwardly around the shaking director as Sool angrily berated him, screaming, before slapping him hard about the head twice.

'Thank you, Chairman,' the man said, fighting back the tears. It was not the pain, but the humiliation, the dishonour and loss of face which hurt.

Then, as suddenly as it began, Sool's storm of fury passed. He even smiled his toothy, charming smile. They all smiled back in relief. 'Ha! But you are a *good* man,' he grinned paternally at his victim. 'Really. A good man. Go now, please. All of you.'

It was clear that he had already forgotten the incident.

The next morning, his driver collected him from the SGT Tower International, the hotel owned and managed, like his jet, by the

SGT Travel and Leisure Division. Since leaving his family, Sool had made the penthouse suite his home. It suited him well given his eccentric lifestyle.

Every year, he made solemn pilgrimages south of the Han-Gang River to the vast national cemetery at Tongjak-Dong Today was the anniversary of his mother's death, and he had never once let business stop him doing his duty to her – flying back, as now, from anywhere in the world especially to be there on her anniversary day, as well as at *Hanshik* in the spring, *Chusok* in the autumn and New Year. Her husband was also buried with her, but it was his mother alone he came to honour.

He had brought a diced apple to offer to her spirit as he kneeled by her geomantically positioned south-facing body Having tidied around the simple granite gravestone, he prostrated himself emotionally on the grass, bowing twice, his head almost touching the ground. Then he called out the mourning chant '*I ee-go*', and poured a cup of rice wine on the grave. The city noise from the nearby Hangangaegyo Bridge thundered, but all he heard was his own unembarrassed sobbing. When he had finished the ritual, tears streaming down his face, he looked around him sharply. There was just one woman, a child strapped to her back, about fifty yards away at one of the identical plain graves No one else. No one watching. Moving quickly, he took a small trowel from his pocket and dug into the soil to the right of the granite gravestone. Buried just a few inches below the surface was a cylindrical metal container With eager fingers he tore at the ground until it came free. Turning the sturdy top, he heard a small intake of air from the resealable vacuum receptacle. Inside was a single sheet of paper protected in a clear plastic wallet. It was the letter given to him by his aunt, Sool Kyung-Wha, over two years earlier, the letter from his mother.

He knew he should really have destroyed it, but he had not been able to do so. It had been far too dangerous to keep at his office or home in Korea, and he did not even trust his bank with it, knowing the power of the government to do almost anything it wanted in the name of state security. He kept a photocopy of it in the safe in his New York apartment. But the proper place for the original was back with his mother. Desecration of graveyards and tombs was, he knew, unthinkable in Korea.

He examined it once more, hands shaking. The handwriting – in Hangul – was firm. She must have been very brave, very calm,

he thought, recalling her face from his distant memory and the handful of old photographs he had of her as a very young woman. Suddenly he felt her presence, her warm-milk smell, her security and protection all around him like a shawl. She was there. Really there once more. And as he reread the letter, it was her voice speaking the words and confessing . . .

Sool Kay-Sheen. My beautiful son. When you read this, you will be a mature man. I will have been in my grave, and the war over for fifty years. I hope our nation has prospered, and you with it. I hope that memories of the war will still be respected and honoured, but that it will be seen as very old history. The hatred for the Japanese by my generation will have been replaced with friendship by yours, as new generations grow a better world than the one I knew. All this I hope for you

For me though there can be no more hope. I am dishonoured and ashamed. I have a duty to tell you this, and I have the right to explain and unburden at last my han

I was seventeen when a policeman came to our village to collect me and some other young girls to join what he called the Patriotic Service Corps. I had been married only two months, and my husband was already away working in a war factory in the south. The other girls and me – some of them just fourteen – were to go to Voluntary Labour Camps as nurses, and be split up. If we or our parents and family resisted, all would face torture and death at the hands of the terrible Japanese military police, the kempeitai. *I was taken on a long journey by truck and forces ship to South China. A Japanese Army base near Hangchow. We did not know it then, but this was just five months before Hiroshima and the Japanese surrender*

When I arrived, there were already other Korean and also young Chinese girls there, at what they called the P Station. There were about thirty in all. Chom-P Koreans, and Chan-P Chinese. They were being raped by soldiers, many times every day. Fifteen times, more sometimes The men paid for tickets. Yen 1.50 for privates up to yen 3 for officers. Sundays were the worst, the soldiers' free day. I was also raped. But it was very senior officers who kept me for themselves

I was sent back as soon as we were liberated. My husband was already home. I knew I was pregnant with you, my

poor son. Any one of the Japanese officers could have been your father.

I did not have the courage to tell my husband what had happened to me Most of the other women also found it impossible to talk about their experience So we said we had been nurses, or factory workers. It is my disgrace that I let my husband think you were his son.

When in the early 1950s some of the women began to tell of their experiences, in what the foreigners started calling the Comfort Stations, I could no longer bear life. I was afraid my husband would ask me things, and I would not be able to lie any more I confided in your aunt, Kyung-Wha, and she assisted me as I ended my shame and years of isolation, suffering and guilt.

My son I ask you now to forgive me for leaving you alone. I pray that being without a mother's love will have hardened you to face the cruel world which I now must leave

Your mother, Sool Joon-Hee.

Sool wept openly and bitterly, as he had the first time She had been right. The world had eventually come to learn everything about Japan and the so-called comfort women Women from Korea, the Philippines, China, Taiwan and Indonesia. Abducted, imprisoned in stations and repeatedly raped by Japanese officers, men and even army doctors. There was a ratio of on average fifty troops for every girl With around seven million troops in the various theatres of war, this gave an estimate of something approaching 140,000 comfort women in all. Almost 80 per cent of them were Korean.

In 1990, two Korean professors produced evidence of a kind even the Japanese government could not ignore. By the fiftieth anniversary of Pearl Harbor the following year, brave Korean women victims were in the world media taking the Japanese government to court over their forced prostitution. Having first continued to deny everything, holding the line that they were just nurses or camp followers, in early 1992 Japan's Prime Minister finally acknowledged the crimes, and eventually offered compensation and some benefits to women who came forward and registered. Unsurprisingly, however, what the campaigners really wanted was not compensation, but the punishment of all those involved.

That was also what Sool wanted, and what he was using his power and money to exact with a premeditated savagery that was shocking even the war criminals on his list. He had obtained from records the names of senior Japanese officers who were stationed at the Hangchow base from 1945. One of them was his father. And some, perhaps most, had raped his mother. Of the fourteen he had been able to identify, three irritatingly had died, leaving eleven who would have to pay. Nine of the eleven had one or more teenage granddaughters With the murder of Chizuko Ito, nine of the girls – one from each family – had been raped and butchered. And the snuff video had been sent anonymously to the old men to watch – and remember. The granddaughters of brothers of the remaining two were next on Sool's list, entailing the final orgy of violence that would at last requite the festering hate that still gnawed remorselessly inside him.

Sool had contemplated suicide after he had first read the letter. With all his conditioned Korean nationalistic hatred of the Japanese, he had suddenly found himself to be part Japanese, the accidental, worthless spillage from his mother's serial rape. He, the respected founder of one of Korea's most successful *chaebol*, had Japanese blood in his veins, and his mother's death on his conscience. He was the cause of her suicide. He, the cancer in her womb, had finally killed her. The guilt was too much. It needed transference. The comprehension of it all was beyond endurance. Absolutely, unimaginably emasculating. All his immense pride and self-respect gone for ever. And there was nothing, nothing anyone could say or do to change it. Except . . .

Except the one thing that had kept him from the seductive, soothing arms of ritual suicide. Revenge. The satisfaction, the retribution it would bring. And the planning of it, to distract his mind and occupy his long, melancholy days and nights. He knew it would not really change anything. It would not make him any less Japanese. It would never restore his self-worth or his reason for being. But it did give him a reason to exist, and a channel through which to marry his talent and vast wealth with his hatred. Revenge might not prolong his life, but it could prolong his death. And this was indeed how he saw it. Sool Kay-Sheen could hear his own death rattle in everything he did, and its gift to him was a complete absence of conscience or remorse. The world might in the end think no better of him than it did of the most brutal

of Japanese war criminals, but that was of no consequence to him now. All that mattered was the letter-perfect execution of the rest of his plan to humiliate Japan and destroy the old men.

It would take somebody very special to stop him now.

Richter was given unconditional bail by the sergeant at Savile Row police station, and Miss Wilkins had collected him before going on to her flat for a meal and a strategy meeting.

'Why don't you take a bath or shower while I fix something?' she suggested, her nose twitching like a rabbit's, as they went inside. 'I've got some disposable razors somewhere from when a relative stayed.'

To her dismay he declined any form of ablution and made, uninvited, for the refrigerator to find a beer. 'I would instead very much like a curry. A hot curry,' he said moodily.

'I can do a curry omelette?' His snort was a clear enough response to that. 'OK, then. There's an Indian restaurant I know. I'll ring for a takeaway delivery. What do you want?'

'Half a tandoori chicken. Vindaloo beef curry. Pilau rice. Dhal. Mushrooms. A stuffed nan,' he replied without thinking. 'Maybe some onion bhaji also.'

Miss Wilkins ordered another tandoori chicken for herself, with a salad, and went to find some cold white wine.

He was in much better spirits after he had eaten every scrap and sunk three more beers, amusingly recounting his experience behind bars. 'I pretended not to speak good English,' he laughed. 'So they sent a policeman with schoolboy German to try and talk to me. Very funny. And then suddenly I said in a BBC voice, "Excuse me, please, but could a fellow have a cup of tea, do you think? Earl Grey if you have it. And a cucumber sandwich, old thing."'

Miss Wilkins was amused that he was amused. His attempted English accent had made him sound unfortunately like Lord Haw-Haw. 'That's all very well, but you really shouldn't provoke them, you know.'

'Sure thing. I know this,' he replied, calming himself. 'What do you think will happen to me?'

'My solicitor thinks they will take over a month to decide whether to charge you. So it shouldn't interfere with our work at Chiasmus.'

'That is good. I was worried about that.'

'You should worry. Really worry. I mean, I'm not sure we should go on with it now.'

He looked shocked. 'But why?'

Miss Wilkins looked at him kindly. 'You're a nice young man, Gerhard. Shy. A loner. Awkward in society. But a nice boy. You just need to meet someone to share things with. And you will if you give people a chance. But what I've got you doing is illegal again. Without explaining why I was asking, I probed my solicitor today. We're certainly committing burglary – entry with intent to commit criminal damage and to steal. And once in we are committing actual theft and damage. I mean, that's the technical definition.

'Also, he told me about the 1990 Computer Misuse Act, which makes it a criminal offence to gain unauthorised access to systems or data. We're guilty on all these fronts. Thanks to me, even poor Molly Spink, the head cleaner, is guilty of what he called aiding, abetting or procuring the commission of a crime.'

'But we already knew these things,' he protested, worried that she was losing her nerve.

'Mrs Spink didn't. But as for you, you're already on bail for a serious enough criminal offence – deception, don't you see? And here am I, a mature woman, encouraging you for my own selfish reasons to go and break the law all over again. If things go wrong for us at Chiasmus you would certainly go to jail. And not in one of those holding cells you were in this morning. It would be horrible. Absolutely horrible. I can't let you risk it, really I can't.'

Richter looked sour again. He could see his chance of making the hacker's super-league evaporating along with Miss Wilkins's resolve. 'Look,' he said earnestly. 'I know exactly what I'm doing. Everything I do almost is outside society's rules. You don't know this, but I have another little business selling my own decoders for pay-TV. And the only reason I do these commercial things is because it gets me money. The money I need to be the world's best hacker. That is my life's goal. My Olympic gold-medal dream.

'This is me. This is what I do. If I was not breaking into the computer at Chiasmus, I'd be trying to do it from home. You see, I don't think that information should ever be owned or kept secret. By anyone. If I had got big defence or nuclear secrets from the Americans or Russians, I would have sent them straight away to the other side. Nothing to do with politics. I happen to think that if everyone has access to everyone else's knowledge and secrets,

then we'd get better-quality decision-making, less conflict, more trust, and the world would be a better, safer place. What I do is a little bit like anarchy to you, yes? But to me it is simple, and I believe passionately in it.'

She had never heard him speak for so long, or be as animated about anything. Still uncomfortable, she needed to think, and went to make coffee. What he said had impressed her, and it was clear that she had come close to patronising him with her homilies about meeting a nice little Miss Right. He was a more mature young man than she had appreciated, with interesting ideas of his own.

When she came back he was still looking worried. 'We go on,' she said, smiling. 'But I want to speed things up. We're an accident waiting to happen in there. I was all but recognised by someone just last night.'

'Yes, yes. This is good,' he beamed, hugely relieved. He would have carried on without her if she had caved in. 'And I agree we should speed up. I can do this. I think the worm is just about ready. I need at most two more nights. Then you can tell me when to let him loose.'

'I want to do something before that,' she replied, gingerly pushing down the plunger on the cafetière. She had scalded herself in the face doing this once. 'Is there any way I can send Sool Kay-Sheen messages direct to his personal E-mail, anonymously?'

Richter thought for a few minutes. 'K-S is fully networked. Anyone in any of the operating companies can send information, designs, spreadsheets, anything like that, to anyone. They also have, as you know, the company suggestion box scheme on the system. Anyone can also send Sool himself any ideas for improving things. There are prizes for the best. So sure. We can send him messages easy. But the system uses asymmetric encryption, for security. This makes it possible to "sign" and "seal" electronic mail envelopes as a sender, and to "open" and "verify" the sender's signature as a recipient '

'You're talking gobbledegook again,' she protested. 'I take it all that just means that anything I send him over the group network could be traced back to the PC or code that sent it.'

'Yes. So that is not good. But there is a way, I think,' he said, slurping his hot coffee. He seemed incapable of eating or drinking anything quietly. 'I know that the chairman also uses the Internet. They have a powerful Internet server at the Seoul headquarters capable of handling over a million accesses a day.'

Miss Wilkins was fairly familiar with the Internet, the ever-expanding global network of computers, linked through gateways. It had its non-military roots in the ARPANET vision of allowing free and easy access and interchange of data, research and opinions between academics and their institutions, and now also embraced some forty million non-academic users worldwide. 'And Sool. Will he have his own personal net address code?'

'Sure. I will find it tonight. Easy. One hacker even broke into Prince Philip's Prestel "mail box" back in 1984. No problem.'

'But would I really be able to send messages anonymously? I've used the Internet. It always gives you a source.'

'This is so. But there are ways to send things anonymously. We must use a remailer service. It is like a post office box number. There is one I have used in Finland. Helsinki. If we pay them, no one will be able to trace your messages I can arrange this. But why? Why would you want to contact the chairman like this?'

Miss Wilkins smiled. 'You said we should all share our information. Well, that's what I intend to do. I'm going to tell him exactly what's about to happen to his empire And why. I'm going shake up his happy complacent life and teach him a thing or two about good old-fashioned revenge.'

'John Blake?'

'Yes '

'My name's Peterson. Harry Peterson. From Management International Can you talk, or can I call you back later?'

Management International is one of the leading firms of executive headhunters, and Blake immediately sharpened his wits. 'Yes. I can talk now.'

'Good. I have an assignment – a very senior international position to fill Public affairs – main board seat, leading to senior general management if things work out I was wondering if there was anyone you could recommend.'

He had been headhunted many times before, and this was the typical opening gambit. Did he know anyone, when what was really being asked was if he was interested himself

'What kind of package?'

'Negotiable. But, say, £120,000. Share options, plus annual bonus. Fifteen per cent non-contributory pension, medical insurance, decent car. All that.'

'What sector is it?'

'No can say, I'm afraid, at this stage. Easy to put two and two if I told you. Incumbent doesn't know. Obviously, if we find someone genuinely interested we'll share things.'

Blake thought quickly. With all this SGT business it was hardly ideal timing, but he had been with Globecom a long time. And in consultancy *too* long. His next move should be in-house, out of PR and into general management. It certainly merited a meeting. And anyway, if you kept saying no, they stopped ringing completely.

'I may be interested myself,' he said. 'At least to hear more.'

'Good, good. I hoped you might say that. Can we get together quickly for a chat? I'm afraid for a variety of reasons it's all rather urgent now.'

'I'm off to Hong Kong next week for a few days. After that?'

'No. Sorry. It's all galloping along a bit. Let's try tomorrow. Can you find half an hour? Early breakfast maybe?'

'Eight o'clock.'

'At the Ritz. I'll book. You got my name? Peterson. Fine. Eight o'clock tomorrow, then.'

Peregrine Mitchell hung up and pencilled the appointment into his pocket diary. Acting as a headhunter was a common first move he used with business people. It ensured they would be discreet. They would not tell their secretary where they were going, and probably not even their wife or husband, if married, for fear of unsettling them too early with worries of a career change and possible move to another city or country, with all the attendant changes of houses and schools. There was a real Harry Peterson at Management International, just in case anyone ever rang in to cancel or check something. As an ex army man he had happily agreed to his name being used occasionally, and to fielding the odd googly that might come his way as a result

The dossier on Blake was fairly thin. They had first rapidly established that he was not related to the Soviet spy, George Blake. His father was in a nursing home in Suffolk suffering from Parkinson's disease. He had been a civil engineer. Blake's mother had died ten years earlier of a severe form of osteoporosis. John had been their only child. The family described themselves as Church of England on wedding and birth certificates.

John Blake had married and then divorced soon after his daughter's death. There was no police record, other than a string

of speeding offences. MI5 had got Special Branch to have a routine sniff at him back in the early eighties, a time when his job was taking him to the USSR and its Comecon satellites. This had not thrown up anything much. They had clandestinely searched his flat and office, talked to a couple of people who knew him, and – in those Stone Age days of electronic surveillance – ran a tap for a week from the phone centre at Ebury Bridge. But nothing. Just a few too many books they had not liked – *Das Kapital*, a signed copy of Tony Benn's *Arguments for Socialism*, Popper's *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, and a library copy of some of Engels' writings. These had been balanced, however, with enough middle-of-the-road and right-wing titles to suggest nothing more sinister than a lively mind. Although in those days that in itself could be grounds for suspicion.

He had signed the Official Secrets Act once when he had briefly worked at Ferranti. Before this, Nottingham University and a 2.1 in politics and history, with no recorded membership of political parties, or participation in marches or protest rallies. Sport seemed to have occupied him more than student politics. Mitchell also had a copy of Blake's latest annual private medical check, along with his most recent tax returns. There was a negative AIDS test, taken for company key-man insurance cover. Apart from drinking too much, and the Revenue computer having him in the lower quartile of credibility on travel and entertainment expenses, there was still nothing. No sexually transmitted diseases, no unpaid tax or evasion. He was even up to date with maintenance payments to his ex-wife.

Despite this, Mitchell still felt uneasy. Blake seemed squeaky clean and his own stock-in-trade was always to have an edge on his target. Some nice piece of guilt that he could use, if needed, as a threatener – just in case Blake did not choose to help. That would be his afternoon's work. He had to find something to give him leverage. Everyone had something to hide. And that, he told himself, had to include Mr John the bloody Baptist Blake.

13

Pornography and Mexico have a long history, originating in the 1910 revolution – actually filmed by early Hollywood camera crews – in which a million people, mostly peasants, died. Avant-garde film-makers like Russia's Sergei Eisenstein were drawn to Mexico to document the extraordinary release of pornography in the 1920s, an explosion generated by the triumphant generals after more than a decade of war The spoils of war they really wanted were not chestfuls of medals, land or money, but unlimited quantities and varieties of sex.

The explosion blew the lid off the stentorian sexual repression so long demanded by the Catholic Church, dating right back to the Spanish conquistadors. But by the '20s the Church itself, and lecherous priests, were fair game as popular subjects for explicit film pornography. In fact, Mexican pornography was far and away the most explicit being shot anywhere in the world at the time, with films like *La Pastilla*, *Perversion* and *Hot Dykes*. The tinsel of nearby Hollywood, powerful men and an easy supply of vulnerable women to exploit formed a pattern that was to become and remain familiar.

The main factors in Mexico's involvement in hard-core porn today remain its poverty and proximity to the film, video and computer wizardry of bored, rich southern California.

Trent had read and digested all he could about the film-making ring· a mixture of young mobsters, reject Hollywood technician cokeheads and Mexican cross-border journeyman criminals. The usual motley bunch of low-life. But with one big difference From all the intelligence they had collected, it seemed that it was a tightly run ship and ruthlessly disciplined. A very brave female Hispanic LAPD Vice Squad officer had gone in under cover and become involved with them as a talent spotter, trawling the streets, cheap lodgings and bars for fresh young prostitutes new to the game, and for halfway attractive male or female wet-backs desperate for a few dollars. It was the best intelligence they had, and she seemed to have won their trust.

'I've read your reports. Fine work,' Trent said to her at their first task force meeting to discuss the planned raid

She took the compliment in her stride. 'Sure.' She was in her late twenties with olive Spanish colouring and a short, powerful body. 'They needed a new face. Spanish speaker. To find new kids. No big deal.' The accent was hard and lispy.

'You ever thought of joining the Bureau?' Trent asked, winking at Dandino, her LAPD boss.

Sure. When you guys grow up. And stop calling female agents Breast-Feds.'

The laughter broke the ice in what could prove to be a tricky inter agency meeting. 'So, how do we play this thing?' Pete Dandino was a detective in the Vice Squad's pornography section. 'Your show or ours?' The FBI have little jurisdiction in crime matters, having to be invited in formally by local police authorities

'I want this led as a Federal SWAT operation. It's inter state and cross-border LAPD gets the glory for any arrests, the Bureau for any convictions later in federal court,' Trent replied firmly. 'But what I don't want is any police – Fed politics. One line of call Me. I'm ex LAPD myself. I've patrolled I've paid my dues. If anyone's got any problems with that, the answer's easy. I'm out of here '

Dandino nodded. 'He got knifed bad here a few years ago. A raid went wrong,' he said to the woman, and then he looked back at Trent. 'And *we* don't need no lectures on teamwork from you or anyone else. Just don't you people screw up.'

Trent was relieved, having got his way. Time to move quickly on. He turned to the female officer. 'You've suggested a plan for a raid. We've all seen it and it looks good to me. Anything you want to add?'

'No. There are not many people on the set at one time,' she replied. 'Maybe ten. Maybe fifteen if the top guys are there. But they don't come regular. No pattern.'

'You say only one or two will be carrying.'

'Yeah. There's always some Mob guy kind of on guard. I've seen maybe five different. Sometimes there's two of them together. When they're rolling for the porn movies the guys like to watch. You know what I'm saying.'

'What weapons do they have?'

'I've seen a Remington shotgun, an 870, and once I saw one of them showing off to a girl with some kind of carbine. Maybe a Heckler and Koch MP5 AZ. But I'm not sure. The only other thing I saw was a guy with his jacket off. He had a shoulder harness with a revolver – a .38.'

'And do you think they'd use them? If faced with overwhelming firepower?'

'Dunno. Maybe one of them. There's this Mexican guy who seems crazier than the rest. He's the one with the H&K. Plenty of firepower of his own, if he knows how to use the thing. The rest, I dunno. Maybe not.'

'And say again. You never witnessed any snuff porn being made? Or even talked about?'

No. Never. But they still don't fully trust me. I'm still new.

'And what's your hunch?'

'It's possible. Sure. There's a lot of drugs with the crew. Their eyes seem like they're dead, you know? Nothing touches them. I mean, only the outsiders get a kick out of watching the screwing. The crew filming it are like walking corpses. There's nothing in there. No feeling. Nothing. So yeah, I figure these technicians could film that shit.'

'And Pete, what do you think?' Trent asked.

'From what we know, the leader is Arnold Beeker. We don't think there's anyone higher than him. You've seen his file. He's been into most things. Armed robbery, drugs, kidnap and ransom, prostitution. Two years in the pen ended nine months ago. When he got out he seems to have been funded by someone. We don't

know who. But he lived well immediately, and not from any previous money All he appears to be doing is this porn movie operation. With state-of-the-art equipment, and heavyweight protection. But skin flicks is now a two-bit business. The big money's gone out of it. So many people worldwide have moved in. It's the video, camcorder age. Anyone can make broadcast-quality porn with easy, cheap new video technology. The old big-budget stuff that made serious money was shot on thirty-five millimetre, like any other real movie. I'm talking about *Deep Throat* and *Debbie Does Dallas*, that kind of thing. Both grossed millions.

'But if those days are over, how come Beeker's living so high on regulation porn? My hunch is someone bankrolled him in a big way. For a reason. Someone very rich wanted some real special movies made. The only thing that comes close to making sense is snuff porn, where they're going to have to pay big bucks to find victims, and their killers. And to keep everyone else quiet and scared. I think we've found the people who made the Fort Worth tape, and probably a whole lot more we haven't seen. I say we go in.'

Trent thought for a while. 'Agreed? We go in. Agreed?' There were nods and grunts of consent. 'Fine. And this officer's proposal seems a good basis for our SWAT people to work on for the raid. The question is when to go in.'

'You've got to move in the next three days. Maybe even two,' the woman replied. 'For security reasons they move the set around every seven to ten days from one warehouse kind of place to another. The next move must be real soon. All it takes is one truck and they're gone.'

The faces around the room turned as one to Trent. He wanted it, now it was his call. He was team leader, and it was time to lead.

'We go tomorrow night,' he said grimly. 'You're welcome to join us, Pete. And let's all keep it tight. There are six of us in this room. We are the only people who now need to know the details. I can put our SWAT squad on stand-by until briefing. After which they are all kept together in isolation. No phone calls, no radios, no talking with buddies. So if there are any leaks, any tip-offs, I'll know they came from this room. Understood?'

'We didn't need to hear that,' Dandino spat in disgust, standing up to leave.

'Maybe not,' Trent replied. 'But I needed to say it.'

* * *

Sool woke, as usual, very early the next morning in his hotel apartment and checked his overnight telephone, fax and network system messages. His days of even thinking about the post were long over. There was nothing from Jane, and his mouth turned down sourly.

After tea and a shower he felt refreshed as he went into the bedroom he had equipped as an office. A press of a button put him through to Trump Tower, and the maid. 'Put Miss Field on,' he said.

'I'm sorry, Mr Sool. Miss Field is at lunch today.'

He looked up at the wall clock set to New York time – there were two others set to Tokyo and London. It was gone four o'clock in the afternoon. 'Who is she with?' he barked.

'With a model friend, Miss Clara, sir. She collected her here at around midday.'

Tension left his voice. 'Ah, yes. She told me this. I remember now. Tell her I called, please.'

The messages he did have were not urgent, and he skimmed through his Reuters newsline service to see what had happened in the world while he slept. Such was the range of his businesses that almost anything could have an impact on him, for good or ill. Hurricanes, political upheavals, currency, interest rate and stock market movements. There was, to his relief, nothing to upset the next phase of the Chinese deal. A natural disaster on the mainland, the death of China's president, or one of the pivotal Politburo grandees – so many things could still frustrate his great gamble, putting at risk his now highly geared corporation. Nothing so far. The world was calm.

Next he checked his company network for E-mail messages, of which there were normally over a hundred a day, despite the various filters built in to protect him from relative trivia. He scrolled through them quickly, his practised eye speed-reading. There were five with flashing exclamation marks, and he went to each of these to check the contents. One was from the MD of SGT Capital, obviously still panicky, confirming some of the finer details of them selling short on the Nikkei 225. The other four were requests for decisions on some operational matters he had discussed the day before. He sent curt telegraphese replies to each, typing rapidly with two stabbing fingers, and then deleted the messages, consigning them to the electronic waste bin.

Next he logged into the Internet, tapping in his code. It also had scores of messages for him, but one caught his attention immediately. It was headlined WARNING, and went on to break the etiquette of all electronic messaging by using upper-case letters exclusively – the computer-screen equivalent of shouting in your face. He experienced an immediate, instinctive sense of fear. Something primeval stirred the hair on his neck, his heart pumped more oxygen to his brain and muscles, adrenalin flowed. He felt as though he were being stalked by something unseen, something dangerous. Using its legendary focus, Sool's mind excluded all else, and he read the message as an African gazelle reads the dense tall grass for signs of hungry lionesses.

SOOL KAY-SHEEN. YOU HAVE DESTROYED MANY JOBS, AND THE LIVES OF MANY PEOPLE IN WHAT YOU CYNICALLY CALL YOUR 'FAMILY'.

BUT YOU HAVE 'RE-ENGINEERED' AND 'RIGHTSIZED' ONE PERSON TOO MANY. NOW IT IS YOUR TURN TO FEEL THE PAIN, ANGER AND REJECTION YOU HAVE INFLICTED ON OTHERS.

WITHIN 24 HOURS THE HELMINTH FROM HELL WILL BEGIN TO CONSUME THE LIVING CORPORATE BODY OF SGT. VERY SOON EVERYTHING YOU HAVE CREATED WILL BE REDUCED TO DRY WHITE BONES. AS RETRIBUTION ON YOU. AND AS A WARNING TO OTHER BIG BUSINESSES THAT THINGS MUST CHANGE.

I AM A WOMAN OF COMPASSION, AND DO WHAT I DO IN SORROW NOT ANGER.

HELMINTH.

He read and reread the message, incredulous. The Internet was not secure – that was the whole point of it in one respect. Crank messages could get through.

Because of this, Sool knew he should dismiss the message as the harmless bile of some malcontent. Someone sacked by one of his many companies, and targeting him simply because he was the ultimate boss, the man whose portrait appeared all over the building, whose corporate philosophy was taught to all employees. But his antennae were telling him something else, and they rarely failed him. What if a group of bitter, redundant staff had really decided

to take revenge? Revenge on a corporation they knew intimately. His own E-mail suggestion box, open for all employees to make contact directly with him, was there for his people to use that intimate knowledge positively to improve efficiency. How easy it would be to stand that on its head, and for other people to use their now discarded talents and knowledge solely to damage the corporation He shuddered at the thought.

Printing off a hard copy, he checked on a computer dictionary the word he had not understood.

Helminth, worm (usually intestinal). Hence helminthiasis, disease characterized by presence of worms in the body.

The meaning was immediately clear to him. Frighteningly clear. As he paced the room his quick mind raced furiously. It could still be a hoax, or an idle threat, but given the imminent Chinese deal he could not afford to take any chances. What did he have to work on? One or more SGT people who had recently been let go. Led by a woman. Some added bitterness there, as she had obviously wanted the fact that a woman was leading the attack to be even more humiliating to him. It had to be someone who had been made to feel extraordinarily bitter – way beyond the normal resentment anyone would feel. Then there was the clever use of the Internet. He had noticed that it was an untraceable remailer message. That suggested someone at home with the new technologies, as of course did the nature of the threat itself – a computer worm. The wording had the ring of someone with English as a first language The UK, USA, Canada, Australia – he had plants in them all.

Picking up his phone, he raised one of his assistants at home. It was 6 15. He told him to go straight to the office and give him within the hour a list of places where layoffs had been made over the last year involving over fifty people, and a list of layoffs, whatever the number, in computer businesses in the English-speaking countries. The Internet remailer service had a number to which he could reply, and he also gave him that with instructions to trace it, whatever the cost.

While he waited, he sent a reply to the remailer number for forwarding.

'Helminth. This is Chairman Sool Kay-Sheen. I do not want to suffer your revenge. I would like to talk to you so we find a solution. If we talk, we can do this. I know. Please call me now, day or night on this private phone.'

He gave the Sat-phone number.

The information on redundancies was with him an hour later. It was a long list. All but his green-field plants had been cutting overheads and laying people off for years. Over the last twelve months, the top numbers for layoffs were at a television and VCR plant in Ireland, a paper mill in Norway, a car venture in Zimbabwe, and Chiasmus Communications in England and Scotland. Chiasmus was the obvious place to start. Glancing at the London clock, he tapped into his PC directory and found the home number of David Mann. A flick of the mouse and the number was ringing on the shout-box.

'Mann. Chairman Sool.'

Mann was used to night calls from Korea, nine hours ahead. But not direct from the chairman. He had been snoozing in front of the television, nursing a gin. Now he sat up abruptly. 'Chairman. Good evening . . . er, morning. Good to hear from you.'

'It is never good to hear from your boss at home,' Sool replied without humour. 'I think we have a problem.'

He told him about the Internet threat, and his suspicion that it was a disgruntled woman, or group of people recently fired by Chiasmus. A powerful, brave woman deeply upset for some exceptional reason. Something that ran deeper than just the loss of her job. Something that had traumatised her not just to dream and scheme, but actually to take direct action. Take revenge. Did Mann have any idea of who such a woman might be?

David Mann's mind turned immediately to Emily Wilkins. To Ian Lilley's death. To her cold look of hate in church. A look that had haunted him since, gnawing at his conscience. He needed time to think, however, before fingering her to Sool, with heaven only knew what consequences. For all her reputation, there was no way she could program in a sophisticated computer virus. 'I'll talk to my people straight away and get back to you as soon as possible.'

'And quickly please. Do it now.'

Ashen-faced, Mann immediately rang his systems director at home. They had crisis procedures for just such emergencies. Damn

it, they even made good money selling disaster recovery services to customers with systems crashed by fire, flood, explosion, power cuts or sabotage. Having given him the bare bones of the worm threat, he asked, 'How secure are we really from this kind of thing?'

The man sounded rattled. He could hear the sound of heads rolling. There was, he well knew, no such thing as complete security 'We're pretty good,' he said defensively. 'Employee vetting, induction, training and refreshers. We test our contingency plans at least twice a year. Our disciplinary procedures are up to speed with the Computer Misuse Act. Also, as you know, last year we had the outside Tiger Team consultants in and acted on all their recommendations.'

Mann did indeed recall this. Chiasmus – along with other big firms – had been hit by a serious blackmail attack. Scores of Chiasmus's employees – all subscribers to a leading PC magazine – had received a computer disk in the post which purported to be able to reduce the odds against winning the National Lottery by half. Once loaded, strictly against company rules, the highly sophisticated software left their computers – and all the others in the local area network – inoperable. Except for one thing. It threw up a screen message demanding that $50,000 be sent to a Panamanian address in order to receive instructions on how to create an antidote vaccine program.

Behind the blackmail was a group of Nigerians working out of rented offices in Mayfair. They had bought the mailing list of the magazine's subscribers from a list broker, and sent 10,000 disks to locations all over the UK. Computers – big and small – were crashing everywhere. Scotland Yard's Computer Crime Unit co-ordinated a national response, and Chiasmus's programmers had within twenty-four hours come up with an efficient vaccine. It had been a real scare, however, and Chiasmus had called in the Los Angeles based Tiger Team – named after USAF counter-intelligence units – to check their systems, and to make recommendations on closing down loopholes and overcoming sloppy staff compliance with procedures. They were also briefed to check for logic bombs and Trojan horses containing deliberate mistakes which could explode on a fixed date – common examples were Friday the thirteenths, Michelangelo's birthdate, or when the unwitting user typed in a pre-set word or phrase.

'Training is all very well. But compliance is still crap. We don't

police it nearly well enough,' Mann snapped, guiltily remembering his own breach in refusing to change his password. He would do it first thing that morning.

'We'll have another look at it. Another blitz.'

'And technically – I mean we've got in-built anti-virus programs, fire walls, and disk encryption. How effective are they?'

'You know my view. The greater the complexity of the kit, the easier it is to manipulate by very, very computer-literate criminals. It's the same with security devices. You don't just put together a bunch of secure products and bolt them to each other. It's not like they're mechanical things. That's the mistake people make. The fact is that some security programs can actually negate others. As for us, we're not so tight. We do just about enough to show due diligence, but that's all. We certainly don't go that extra yard. It's a malaise of the industry. The sloppiest people with regard to computer security are always the computer experts themselves. The cobbler's son and all that.'

'Well, you can keep those opinions to yourself for the time being We're both going to be under pressure from Seoul on this. Be in my office by seven Before everyone else is in. And bring that security consultant you use with you. Templeton, isn't it? It's about time he did something for his bloody retainer. Because if we're under imminent attack from a worm, we'd better get our defences up. And fast.'

Mann hung up and noticed that his hands were shaking. His wife had heard most of what he said and had pieced the story together. 'Someone's hacking. Is it serious?'

'It could be,' he replied, his voice trembling.

'Any ideas who's behind it?' She had rarely seen him so shaken.

His face darkened and he nervously ran his hand through his hair 'Oh yes I'm pretty sure I know who it is. And I've got a feeling it's too late to stop it. She's not someone to do things by halves. Or to make empty threats. If she's told Sool she's going to bring us down, then I don't doubt she can – and will.'

The exuberant Louis XVI style of the Ritz restaurant, with its magnificent *trompe l'oeil* ceiling and flattering mirrors, is perfect in the evenings, when it complements superb cuisine, a legendary wine cellar, matchless service and perhaps discreet piano music

from the shows. For an early morning working breakfast, however, it can all be a bit much

There were only five tables occupied when Blake arrived and gave his host's name. Mitchell's table was to the right in the corner, against the wall. Old habits die hard. Security people hate sitting near windows or in the middle of rooms. As he was led over, Blake looked at the other diners to see if he recognised anyone. Breakfast at the Ritz was renowned for secret assignations of all kinds, not just with headhunters. Many a takeover deal was hatched and many a large contract agreed there every month in hushed tones over the scrambled eggs He nodded across the room to a *Daily Telegraph* City page journalist, but did not recognise the man with him.

Peregrine Mitchell stood up to greet him. He was a shortish, stocky man, bald on top with neatly trimmed black hair forming an interrupted circle, one almost completed by bushy eyebrows and thick-rimmed, unfashionably narrow black spectacles. With his charcoal suit, the jacket buttoned over a white shirt and dark military tie, he cut a sinister figure. His thin lips parted over his even tombstone teeth in what passed for a smile. 'Mr Blake. I'm Harry Peterson. Good to meet you.'

Blake shook the strong, dry hand and looked into the intelligent eyes. 'Good to be here,' he smiled back nervously. 'Meeting like this is all a bit strange to me. But I suppose you must be used to all this cloak-and-dagger stuff '

'You could say that,' Mitchell replied, waving Blake into a seat. 'But let's order first. Then we can talk undisturbed. I know you have to be away by about nine fifteen. Yes?'

Blake ordered orange juice, poached eggs, white toast and coffee, Mitchell prunes, kedgeree and Assam tea. But once the waiter had left them he made no attempt to start the conversation, forcing Blake into making small-talk about the economy and politics to fill the awkward silence. He simply watched and listened with a half-smile still on his wide mouth. It was a tactic he often used. Let the target become nervous, and encourage them to gabble on, revealing themselves unwittingly.

After tea and coffee had arrived Blake assumed that Mitchell would at last open up about the job, realising that he was to some extent still being appraised by the man for general suitability and chemistry. But still he just smiled, and batted back his questions with other questions – reflective responsing, the psychologists' old game.

They were halfway through their meal before Blake decided to let his impatience show. 'Look. I've got a nine thirty,' he said, pouring more coffee. 'Do you want to tell me something about the job?'

Mitchell sipped his tea, slurping it gently, unembarrassed, like a man who had spent much of his time in the East. Then he pushed his plate away and wiped his mouth with his napkin, which he then proceeded to fold neatly before placing it on the table. Looking around, he pulled his chair a little nearer, and turned his full attention to Blake. The smile now died on his lips. 'Mr Blake. In truth I *am* a kind of recruitment agent. But not the kind you're expecting,' he said, his voice flat and very soft, commanding even greater attention as Blake struggled to hear. 'I am employed by the Secret Intelligence Service. You will know my organisation better as MI6 The job I have to offer you is, I'm afraid, unpaid and carries a little risk. It should, however, give you great job satisfaction. Because you would be helping your country, and – if I'm right – averting a major terrorist incident.'

Blake's curious profession inured him to surprises. He thought of himself as virtually unshockable, but Mitchell had slipped past his urbane front and left him in a state of total disbelief. Trying quickly to gather himself, he parried weakly, 'Well, that's one I haven't heard before.' He reached for more toast as he collected his thoughts He had better prepare himself. Mitchell was disorienting and frightening him, and he did not like it one bit.

'When do you fly out to Hong Kong?' Mitchell asked

'Next week. But look . . . I mean, no offence, but you sit here and tell me you're some sort of government agent. How do I know you are who you say you are?'

Mitchell had anticipated this. 'If I showed you some sort of ID you wouldn't know what you were looking at. After all, we *are* supposed to be secret. Though you'd never know it these days. What with that woman from across the river making Dimbleby Lectures in posh frocks. Thank goodness she's gone. But you are right to want to check. Here Ring this number and ask for this man ' He handed Blake a blue Metropolitan Police 'business' card. 'It's the main Scotland Yard switchboard. Ask to be put through to him. He's a DC in the Special Branch. Ask him to describe me and verify what I've said. My name is not Peterson but Mitchell. Perry Mitchell. Go ahead. Make the call outside, then we can really talk.'

In truth, all Mitchell had on him was his swipe card for gaining entry to the SIS building.

Blake was certain he was telling the truth, but having made an issue of it felt obliged to make the call. He was back a few minutes later. 'OK. And he says to remind you that you owe him a tenner.'

Mitchell smiled again. 'He's a bandit We have a golf society with Five and SB. It's good for inter-service relations. But then of course you play yourself. Off eight, isn't it?'

This piece of personal information reminded Blake that he was on dangerous ground, and at a serious disadvantage in the relationship. 'You obviously know a lot about me. It's time you told me more about what you want.'

'The detail will require another meeting before you fly out. But the principle is straightforward enough. We need you to tell us everything you know about Sool Kay-Sheen. Including whatever it is he's got you working on with him. And we need you to keep very close to him and report back regularly. We'll tell you how.'

'Never volunteer for anything.' His father's old army advice echoed back to him. And good advice it still seemed. Why should he spy for them? They had given him no good reason. Sool was a client and deserved fair and professional treatment. It would be highly unethical of him to reveal secrets. A spy . . . How quickly the popular image of the glamorous espionage agent gave way to the ugly, tawdry reality of lies, betrayals and crepuscular men like Mitchell.

'Are you telling me there's a national-interest side to all this?'

Mitchell had foreseen that Blake would be difficult. Worthy appeals to patriotism would not be enough. They would help, but he would need prompting. Time to put on some pressure. 'Mr Blake. Everything I say to you today is covered by the Official Secrets Act You understand that?' Blake nodded, looking increasingly uncomfortable. 'Well, then. I can tell you that Sool Kay-Sheen has been twisting the nose of what we might call the Establishment now for well over a year. Giving money overtly and covertly to unpopular regimes and causes in the West and Middle East. Funding those highly publicised attempts by Western veterans and Asian comfort women to obtain grovelling government apologies and greater compensation in Japanese courts for war atrocities.'

'Is any of that illegal? Some would call him a humanitarian.'

Mitchell ignored the interruption. 'The point is this. It's all a front to keep us guessing at what he's really about. For example, why has he been having highly secret talks with senior Chinese recently? I think you could throw some light on this.' He raised his eyebrows expectantly. 'And I can tell you that he's also, at the same time, had a go-between pay a violent Moscow group big money to carry out some kind of outrage. We don't yet know what.'

Blake looked and felt uncomfortable. Sool playing the world markets was one thing. Some kind of criminal terrorism was another. 'I don't know what to say. It's very difficult,' he mumbled lamely.

'He's psychotic, you know,' Mitchell continued. 'We've had a psychiatrist profile Sool's behaviour patterns recently. There's no doubt at all that he is seriously unstable. From what we have, it seems there was some major trauma in his life a couple of years ago, and he's become progressively worse ever since. Do you have any idea what caused it?'

'No. But he has admitted to me that something devastating happened back in 1995. He won't talk about it, though. Not to anyone.'

'Not even Jane Field?'

Blake squirmed. Just how much did these people know? He decided to clam up in order to buy thinking time. 'I doubt it very much. But then it's not the kind of thing I'd discuss with her anyway.'

Mitchell immediately sensed the slight negativity that had crept into Blake's voice and body language. Time to press home his advantage. 'So. What can you tell me about this China business?' The fixed half-smile was back.

'Look. You're asking me to break client confidentiality. And City rules on inside knowledge. I'm sorry. I really don't think I can help you.' Blake was avoiding his eyes.

Mitchell used his long silence tactic again, still looking enigmatic whilst coiled to strike.

'Mr Blake,' he said at last. 'When we're dealing with questions of national security . . When we're dealing with a possible – a likely – terrorist incident . . Well, we tend to be fairly insistent on getting the help we need from people. I've asked politely for some help from you. I could be a lot more, well, demonstrative if you force me to.'

Blake did not like being cornered. Affected moral outrage welled in him as a conditioned, very English defensive response. 'If that's some kind of threat, then I don't think much of it. I mean, why should I risk my own reputation and that of my company for somebody I met less than an hour ago? You haven't given me any hard proof that Sool is acting criminally. Just half-suspicions It's not on.'

Mitchell's gaze persisted, the look of a predator fixing its prey Again he took his time before replying, adding to Blake's discomfort. 'Why should you help me? What if I simply said "hammer drills". Would that do?'

Blake hissed an expletive and sank his head in his hands. How the hell could they possibly know about that?

'How many are still in there?' Trent asked.

'Five. And the two "movie stars",' replied the electronic surveillance technician. They had the warehouse wired for sound. And fibre-optic filaments, barely thicker than a human hair, were sending low-quality live pictures from different angles of the large floor being used for the set.

They were in the back of a specially built response vehicle, which from the exterior looked like any other regular Ford van. It was, however, stuffed with arms and electronics. Trent's SWAT team of twelve, all wearing body armour, were now all within sixty seconds of the warehouse. Two were equipped with shoulder-carry pile-drivers designed to punch their way through just about any door. The rest were a well-rehearsed team, experienced in surprise raids – mostly for drug offences – each knowing precisely what their job was when the attack signal was given. A mental image of the warehouse was fixed in their minds from a three-dimensional model Trent had commissioned from the female officer's description and City Hall building plans They had also rehearsed in the training centre, where a life-sized three-dimensional floor plan of the main attack area had been mocked up in the old aircraft hangar

Trent looked at his watch – almost two o'clock, Saturday morning – spoke into his radio and told them to stand by. 'The word is "imminent". Repeat, "imminent".'

He then waited until the crew inside began shooting another scene in the regulation hard-core movie, figuring that the best time to go in was when all the film technicians were working. And the guard, as usual, watching.

The theatrical grunts, groans and cries of ecstasy were signal enough. 'The word is "Go". Repeat. The word is "Go. Go! GO!"'

Within ninety seconds, the heavy front and rear doors were smashed open and the teams were swarming up the two staircases, fanning out to disappear in the blacked-out gloom of the perimeters of the first floor.

Trent was with them, and had helped disarm the guard. The man had indeed been distracted, watching the action, and was halfway down the main stairs to check out the noise from the doors when he found himself staring down at three marksmen. All of them had assumed firing position, two with 10mm semi-automatics and the third with a rifle, the red dot of its laser sight playing over his heart. FBI agents are authorised to shoot to kill, but the prime objective of SWAT squads is to capture targets alive. It was a distinction lost on the guard, who quickly surrendered.

The technicians simply stopped what they were doing and found themselves spreadeagled on the floor before they knew what was happening. The performers seemed completely unfazed by it all. The blond Scandinavian-looking man seemed high on something and simply sat on the edge of the bed, his erection undiminished by the coitus interruptus. The red-haired girl had porcelain-white skin which lividly showed the ugly red marks left by the session. She had pulled on a dressing robe and stood with her arms folded across her silicon-proud breasts.

It had all been undertaken with clinical efficiency, and Trent began to worry that he had overstated the danger, and brought far too large a team. Now satisfied that there was no threat to his men, he began to look around. There were a great many tapes, all of which would have to be scrutinised for leads on the Japanese enquiries. Also, he would have the forensic people check the bed, floor and joists for traces of free-flowing blood.

Next he quickly looked through the props chest. It was crammed with a predictable range of sexy underwear, rubber and leather gear, sex toys, some bondage equipment and uniforms – even a police uniform. Then his heart leapt. Stuffed down the back he saw it glistening. Scarlet silk. A kimono. More than that. As he tugged it out and inspected it, he was almost sure. It was so distinctive. A dragon was picked out in gold across the bodice. He was sure it was the dress he had seen before. In the video. In *that* video. If he was right, it was a real break. The first possibility

of establishing forensic evidence linking this group to the series murders . . .

He never heard the explosion. Its foul hot breath and hurricane energy picked him up like a rag doll and threw him ten yards across the room and out of the window. His eyes, nose and throat were scored by the abrasive heat as he flew through the air . . .

Then sudden blessed relief. Oblivion. Stillness. A comfort blanket of inpenetrable black.

It was just after nine o'clock the following morning. Mann was pale and worry was showing on his face. The ex-police officer sitting opposite saw this and reflected, not for the first time, on the inability of civilians to cope with real stress. A spell with the forces or emergency services should, he had long thought, be compulsory for all young people. Being the first on the scene at a multiple motorway pile-up, or walking the streets of Belfast in uniform, would soon put a threat of computer blackmail into context.

'What are your initial thoughts?' Mann asked him. 'You know us well enough.'

Reg Templeton had spent twenty years with the police – latterly as an instructor for computer fraud investigators, a growth area. He did know Chiasmus well, having been its security consultant since retiring from the force at the age of fifty-five. 'Seventy per cent of computer fraud, even when detected by management, is not reported to the police Because it damages customer and investor confidence in the management. Especially, of course, if the company is itself a computer firm,' he replied, watching Mann shift around in his seat. 'In this case, it's clear what we have. Disgruntled ex-employees. Maybe existing staff too. There have been a lot of interesting psychological studies done on this kind of thing, mostly in the States. None has gone beyond what criminologist Donald Creasy was saying a quarter of a century ago, though. He found that white-collar fraudsters almost always believe themselves to be honest people.

'They are able to rationalise their behaviour either by believing they are simply borrowing money, with every intention of paying it back later, or because they consider their actions far less bad than those of their employers. So there will be little if any guilt for them to cope with. No guilty faces to look for. If confronted, they

will often reject the seriousness of their crime, claiming their role in the company's problems was just one among many others intent on pulling it down. I've seen this even when their actions have caused the bankruptcy of the firm and the loss of everyone's job. It's never their fault. There are in fact several examples of people like this taking a business under.' Templeton was laying it on thick for Mann deliberately. He did not like him much, knowing that he had hitherto paid no more than lip service to his earlier reports and advice. It felt good to see him squirming now, and to have been proved so spectacularly right for once.

'So, what *should* we be looking for?' Mann cut in, becoming annoyed.

'Typically it will be someone – or groups of people – who always seems to be the first in and last to leave. Someone who doesn t take their holiday entitlement We need to check people like this still on the books. And very recent leavers Also we need to check people with access to the system. On and off the payroll. You use teleworkers, don't you? They need checking. Plus temporary-assignment people – outsourced services. Not just technical and clerical, but caterers, cleaners, security, building maintenance people.

'Then, of course,' Templeton continued authoritatively, 'if this worm threat is serious, we know that at least one person involved is highly computer-literate. A programmer probably. Most likely young. A real enthusiast. Logic bombs are not so difficult to program in. But a worm is sophisticated stuff.'

'But what I don't understand is why they sent Sool a warning,' Mann protested.

'That's also quite typical in these situations. Computer freaks, hackers and the rest are notorious for boasting about what they've done They all do it Everyone wants to be recognised as the new star. And, of course, if this is really all motivated by revenge, then they'll want to extract every last ounce of discomfort and pain from their victims Frankly, they want to rub Sool's face in it. They'll be enjoying thinking of us sitting here anticipating disaster. One East End mob in my days on the force was known for sending organ donor cards in advance to people they were going to hit. Not very nice. But extremely effective.'

'So, what do you recommend we do?'

'OK if I smoke?' Templeton asked, reaching for his pocket.

'Sorry. We have a no-smoking policy.' Mann did not look the least bit sorry.

'I'd forgotten that. Never mind. But what to do? Well, being realistic, we have almost no time left to us. This thing could hit us today, tomorrow. It could be happening as we speak. The real question is are you prepared to shut down the system, the entire network, right now?'

Mann looked at him as if he were mad. 'Of course not,' he snorted.

'Why not? If this thing really is a worm we might not be able to stop it. It could in time infect computer systems all round the world, causing untold chaos.'

'That option is not on the agenda. Unless that's the word from Seoul. Think about it, man. Chiasmus, a world leader, admitting it had been brought to a standstill by a virus it couldn't prevent, detect or eradicate. We'd be an industry laughing-stock. Customers would leave in droves.'

Templeton took an envelope out of his pocket and handed it to Mann. 'I disagree. That letter confirms that my professional advice to you was to shut down for a period. I didn't expect you to concur, but I want it on the record. I'm sending a sealed copy to my own solicitor to keep. If this goes as wrong as I think it could, I want my back covered. Sorry.'

Mann took the envelope and threw it unopened on to his desk. 'You can afford the luxury of having comfortable play-safe opinions. I have the responsibility of making decisions. Now, if that's your first option, it's dead in the water. What next?'

Templeton shrugged his shoulders. 'Well then, it's now your call. We've got no time for anything very subtle. We have to act. Years of experience of fraud and suchlike have taught me two things. First, go with the laws of probability. The person or persons most likely to be responsible are also the most obvious. And second, let them know right off that *you* know. Sweat them. Pressure them. They'll be amateurs at crime and we've got every chance of them cracking once a jail sentence and social disgrace are staring them in the face. So, it's over to you and your people. You've had a couple of hours looking at personnel records, and speculating. Who's the obvious suspect? There always is one. Who?'

Mann stood up, uncomfortable. He had no choice, but he did not like it. What if he was wrong? Templeton was not the most gentle

of human beings. And he still felt bad about what he himself had already done to her. Yet his career was well and truly on the line. As well as the big loan for his home extension, the school fees.

'Emily Wilkins. The chairman's old secretary. You know her,' he said at last, feeling wretched, a Judas.

Templeton certainly remembered her. She had helped him many times. A real champion of higher security compliance standards Nothing could surprise him any more, however. 'And what happened?'

'I had to let her go. Let me see.' Mann opened her file – one of a dozen on his desk. 'Two weeks ago.'

'And was she bitter? Threatening?'

'No. No, not at all. She was shocked, of course. But she made no threats. Nothing like that.'

'Does she still come round here? Stay in touch? Drop in on friends?'

'As far as I know, she's never set foot in here since that night. The only time I've seen her was at the funeral.'

'Funeral? Whose funeral?'

Mann felt guilty and vulnerable under Templeton's clinical questioning. 'It was an old colleague. Ian Lilley. He'd left us some time ago. He'd been company secretary, but the role became redundant. Anyway, the next I heard was that he'd killed himself.'

'As a result of being fired?'

'He was suffering from depression.'

Templeton looked hard at him. 'I see,' he said. 'And was Miss Wilkins close to him? Were they friends?'

Mann nodded, stood up and walked fretfully to the window.

'Anyone you suspect with a technical background? Someone capable of this kind of complex programming.'

Still with his back to Templeton, Mann replied, 'There are quite a few programmers who have been shaken out over the past year. And plenty still with us who might well be feeling pretty insecure. But none were especially close to Miss Wilkins. And none is an obvious candidate for your law of probability.'

'What about any other recent suspicious incidents – hacking, viruses, unexplained network crashes . . . That kind of thing.'

'We had a LAN crash last summer. But that was just the air-conditioning in the server breaking down in the heatwave.

That's all. There's been nothing serious, not since that German hacker you helped us nail.'

'What about him? Have you heard anything about him since? Richter, wasn't it?'

'Nothing. And that was well over a year ago.'

Templeton frowned. 'Did Miss Wilkins know him?'

'No. I mean everyone knew *her*. But she had no operational dealings with him. Or people like him.'

'Let me have her home address. And his,' Templeton said grimly, also standing up.

Mann turned, visibly blanching. 'You don't think . . .? Surely? God help us if *those* two have got together!'

'The person with the most inside knowledge about Chiasmus. Bar none. And, without question, the most talented hacker I've ever come across,' Templeton said. 'If I'm right – if somehow they've teamed up and got access – then you and SGT are in deep, deep trouble. Cancel all leave, dust off those emergency plans. We're about to go to war.'

The picnic had to be just right. Everything had to be exactly as it always was. Exactly.

The wicker case looked all its fifty years, but inside, the blue and white plates, cups, jugs, the cut-glass goblets and condiment set and the silver cutlery all sparkled like new. Only the bone handles of the knives were yellowing. Traitors – letting the side down. Mother had bought the case on a day trip to Harrods in 1937, and it had been a treasured possession of the Wilkins family ever since. It had been used in the garden of the old rectory, just outside Burford, where they had always lived – the still-playful Windrush splashing its way at the bottom to its destiny with the Thames. It was used on days out in the old Lagonda. It was used at the village cricket matches Father used to umpire. It was used on holidays to Cornwall, the Lake District and the Highlands.

Above all it was used on their day out every year to celebrate their wedding anniversary. Father had proposed to Mother while they were students at Oxford, and they had married in Burford the year they graduated. Each year since the couple had visited the church on their anniversary, said private prayers to bless their wonderfully happy marriage, and then driven off to picnic at their favourite spot nearby, the ancient Rollright Stones, the Cotswolds'

own little Stonehenge. When Emily had arrived, they had of course taken her with them on the pilgrimage each year, and since their deaths she had kept up the tradition. Just herself and the picnic basket.

Part of the tradition was what they took to eat. They always had the same things. A bottle of hock, quails' eggs, smoked salmon, slices of game pie, a roast chicken, potato salad, ripe tomatoes, a piece of Stilton (for Father), crumbly Cheshire, and a pear and apple pie. And so it was again. Smaller portions just for her. But she still took a little Stilton, even though she would never eat it. Mother had done the same when Father had been away in the war. Not to do so would have been unthinkable. It was an offering to the absent, a ritual mirrored in many cultures and civilisations, from ancient Egypt to modern-day South Korea.

Father had finally come back to them from the navy. At least 90 per cent of him had. The war had changed him. He had become nervous, more vulnerable, and with a mannerism he never subsequently lost of suddenly blinking both eyes hard together, screwing up his face into an involuntary gurneyed smile. He had also developed a slight stutter. They knew that something terrible must have happened to him, but they never asked and he never told them.

Having said a brief prayer in the church, she drove north along the A361 and was soon by Long Compton, where she parked in the layby at the northern end and took the heavy wicker case out of the boot. Turning left by the old post office, she began the mile-long hike through farmers' land, over the footbridge and along the edge of a field. When she arrived she was relieved to see no other visitors. She would have the special place and all its memories to herself. Herself, that is, and the free range chickens pecking at the lichen.

The Rollright Stones are nothing like as arresting a sight as Stonehenge, but the seventy-six stones that make up the circle, known as the King's Men, have long been held to possess mystical power. The circle was built around 2000 BC for some kind of sun worship. In the legend, the stones represent the loyal army of an ambitious nobleman. Tempted by a witch with the crown of England if he could sight Long Compton by taking just seven strides, he was turned into stone when he failed the test. So too were his men, grouped together in the east and known as the Whispering Knights.

Having carefully laid out three place settings, she took the

half-bottle of hock from the cooler, uncorked it and poured a little into each glass. Standing again, she held the golden wine up to the weak sunlight and made a toast out loud 'Mummy. Daddy. Happy anniversary. God bless ' It was a very old wine and tasted of a long hot German summer almost two decades earlier. A summer she had enjoyed with them, the little family together in their strangely protected world. The flowers and ripe grapes of that time frozen in the bottle, like the aspic around her memories.

They had been so utterly as one, in tune with each other. Never missing a beat. A mildly Bohemian family. Father had remained an academic, going back to Oxford as a don after the war, with Mother teaching under-elevens, and making good money in the summer running short courses on watercolour painting.

Their rambling house, with its ever-open windows and doors, the dreamy, drowsy aromatic gardens, the lawn tennis court, the orchard with the tall pear tree into which the noisy guinea fowl used to fly every night to escape the fox, the conservatory where people admired the tiny white grapes that were never quite edible . . . The endless lunches and weekend parties with students, Daddy's London military types, civil servants, Mummy's painter friends – Augustus John several times – and the musicians at the old Bluthner grand The Sealyhams, Labradors, stray cats, her pony Dingle and grumpy companion Nat, the rescued donkey . .

Then, within the space of one terrible year, 1974, they were both gone, leaving her utterly, numbingly alone She had tried living on in the rectory but could no longer bear the memories in every corner, every cracked saucer, every scratch in the paintwork. Most of the pets had died or had been found good homes by the time she finally decided she had to give up her pin-money job in the Bodleian Library and strike out for somewhere busy and noisy For London Selling the house had been bad, but breaking up the contents she could not take had been much worse. But she got through it to start a new life in her mid thirties As a perfect secretary A new life that led her to give one of her first employers, the then fledgling computer company Chiasmus, the unquestioning dedication, love even, that she had so long focused on her parents. Her Bohemian tastes and free intellectual spirit were to be hidden from the world, securely locked in her apartment to which few were invited. Soon, Miss Wilkins and Chiasmus were symbiotic, the one without the other unthinkable.

As for relationships, how could any gauche young man possibly have offered her anything remotely approaching what she received from her parents? And later in life, was any thirty- or forty-plus crusty bachelor, let alone a dog-eared divorcé or widower, likely to supply any match for the relationship Mummy and Daddy had? This became her constant yardstick, her impossible Turandotian test She would not settle for less. Now at fifty-nine she was still a maiden, and with a hysterectomy behind her was comfortable and unresentful about her life of celibacy. Comfortable with her independence and the freedom it gave her. Thankful even to have avoided the competitiveness and hurtfulness of so many of the relationships she quietly observed. She did however deeply miss Chiasmus in her life. The child substitute had become a dead baby at her withered breast.

But the picnic this year was not proving a success. For the first time it all suddenly made her feel foolish. In the distance she could see people hiking towards the Stones. What would they think of her? A mad, sad old woman with a picnic set for three. Tears welling in her eyes, she hurriedly put everything away, spilling wine on Mummy's best rug and almost kneeling in Daddy's Stilton. Her mind was swarming with conflicting emotions. She *did* suddenly feel foolish, yet she still desperately needed the anchor of her private world, and its continuing communion with her parents. If she was losing that, what then? She would be left with only hate and revenge. Thin gruel. Thin and unsatisfying gruel. It was not enough. Not nearly enough for her.

14

Yuri Dzerzhinsky, the underworld *shavki*, knew how to frighten people. He had been well trained in the dark arts during his time with the SOBR forces in Chechnya. Fear had then been a constant partner. Fear of his cruel, alcoholic Spetsnaz unit commander. Fear of the Chechnyans and their long tradition of blood revenge. Fear of never having a life. And the wholly separate fear of death. He woke up with fear, and slept with it again each night. Now he was about to use his mastery of fear in the service of the money anonymously passed to him by the Korean in the Hotel National.

His victim, sitting by him in the small, smoky bar, had got the message. He either helped Dzerzhinsky or paid the price. The price was his life, but he knew it could easily escalate upwards to include his wife and children. A missing half-finger was evidence of the man's earlier naïve resistance to the protection mobsters and, not for the first time, he cursed his job. During the safe, for him happy, days of Brezhnev, Andropov and even Gorbachev, that job had been a peach. As one of the operations heads of state airline Aeroflot, he had enjoyed many perks and privileges. Foreign travel

to oversee maintenance and fuelling contracts around the world, and to important air shows like Paris and Farnborough. And he had also enjoyed a constant supply of all the Western goodies that the crews were able to bring back, legitimately and also as contraband, smuggled in using the secret corners and crevices of the planes' holds which he showed them.

He had also been one of the key liaison operatives working with the KGB, and this gave him even greater privileges and influence. The airline was treated as an additional arm of the armed forces. This was not so unusual even in the West. Pan Am, before its demise, had long held the contract for CRAF, the Civil Reserve Air Force – its 747s strengthened for military use in case of war. As for Aeroflot, the Services Directorate of the KGB had used it to carry over 25,000 of the 80,000 men drafted in to invade Afghanistan. The airline today, however, is a metaphor for the state of Russia itself. Inefficient and under-funded.

'What is it this time? Out or in?' the man asked, resigned to doing whatever he must.

Dzerzhinsky pulled on his cigarette and avoided looking at him. Given different circumstances he would not be doing these things. He had wanted to be an architect. A builder, not a destroyer. 'Out.'

'Where to?'

'Tokyo.'

He whistled and shook his head. 'Tokyo. That's difficult. They have very tight security. Looking for drugs. It's one of the tightest airports in the world. How big an item will it be?'

'A machine pistol. Some rounds. Twenty kilos of Semtex Odourless. Timers and detonators. That's it.'

'I don't need to know what it is. You always tell me what it is!'

'Because it makes you my partner. It gives you even more reason to make sure nothing goes wrong And anyway, you know it isn't going to be potatoes in there. It's drugs or guns. Right? The Wednesday night flight. I'll be on it. I'll get the stuff to you the day before, and expect to have it delivered back to me the day after we land. I'll give you the address.'

The usual way the man got things out was to wait until after the passengers had disembarked, and find some repair and maintenance work that needed doing. By simulating an unserviceability in the aircraft he could have it towed to the hangars, where security

is far less stringent and vehicular access easy. It was then much simpler to get a package out with some plane-side worker. It was all much more convenient, however, on official state operations, as they could then use the diplomatic bag.

'Is that it? Can I go now?'

'Stay. Have a drink. Business is over.' Dzerzhinsky was a loner by instinct, but hated to drink on his own.

The man reluctantly agreed, and a bottle of good-quality vodka – Russkaya – was brought over. They spoke little over the first half, but as they began to sink the rest he began to relax and treat Dzerzhinsky as if he were really a good friend, as drunken men do. 'I don't think you like what you do,' he said, boldly.

'We all do what we have to these days.'

'Things are not good. Are you a Zhirinovsky man?' Vladimir Zhirinovsky was the ultra-right-wing politician still frightening the pants off the West – and not a few Russians. Annexing Alaska, until 1867 Russian America, was only one of his ideas.

'He'd have me shot! He wants to shoot criminals. I hate all politicians. Maybe we should bring back the Romanovs! And you?'

'Well, I like him. At least he has a point of view. He gets us respect in the West. We are being colonised, and I don't like it. And the people like him.'

'Pah! A "strong leader". That again,' Dzerzhinsky snorted. 'Sure. Look around. All the ordinary Muscovites like him. The drunks. Ivan Vodkaheads! But that's no longer a way. We have to *let* the West take us over, so then later we can beat them at their own game. Like Japan and Korea have done. It's people like me leading the way. We've learned all about capitalist crime – about terrorism, about drugs, prostitution, protection, money-laundering, kidnapping, gun-running, nuclear smuggling, pirating software, hacking, counterfeiting brands . . . We're as efficient at all of them now as anyone in the USA or Europe. Name me one other sector of the Russian economy that can make the same claim. And the reason is that all the talent, all the entrepreneurs, have been driven into crime as the only way to make money. Give people like me another outlet, and we'd beat the world. Look at the Russian kids hooked on computers. There's at least one other Bill Gates, another Microsoft out there amongst them – but the only outlet for their talent is hacking and coming up with more and better viruses.'

'You should go into politics yourself,' the man replied, draining his glass, genuinely impressed.

'No. No chance of that. It's too dirty for me.' Dzerzhinsky's reply was given without a trace of irony. But his interest in talking to the timid man was now fast waning. A young prostitute had just come in, wearing a pair of skin-tight rubber pants and long shiny boots, under a short fur jacket. Her face, framed in a mink hat, looked beautiful through the haze of the vodka. 'Time to go home to your fat wife, my friend,' he said. 'Time you went home '

It had been a good start to the day. And they did not come too often at the South Bronx school for problem kids. Danny, a six feet seven half-caste thirteen-year-old, had come back to school early Saturday, having run away from home three weeks earlier. He had a single-parent home, a black mother with four other younger children. The woman was clean of drugs and doing her best for them all, but she suffered badly from epileptic fits and, with no help, found it tough to cope. Danny was not equipped to act as a surrogate father to them all. Not just because of his age. He had psychological problems, a low sense of self-worth, and a real feeling of alienation. Being half-caste in a black area can be tough on the strongest of individuals. For Danny it was altogether too much. None of the street gangs, a vital fraternity for establishing street cred, wanted him, nobody at class made any attempt to involve him, driving the boy into a brittle, easily pierced shell. His only outlet had been basketball, on which he had focused all his young energies. When, despite his excellent form, he had been left out of the school team for a big match, it had all been too much. He had just vanished.

Fuji had persuaded Richard to lean on the police in their search for him but Danny was, she knew, just one of thousands of missing kids they had reported to them each year. Then that morning he had turned up at school and asked the janitor to call her. He had hitched to Boston, the last address his mother had known for his father. The man had been a salesman for Heinz, and Danny had tried the phone books and local Heinz sales offices, he had tried asking grocery store buyers if he still called, and even rang Heinz's head office in Pittsburgh to try to trace him. Without success. Only one guy said he remembered him, and that he had been fired years earlier, he thought for drinking and pestering shop

assistants. Danny, however, had learned from his days on the road to Boston, begging and sleeping rough, living off his wits – and confidently succeeding. He had experienced a modest kind of Pauline conversion, deciding to work hard on his education, to try for college – maybe a basketball scholarship – and to lift himself out of a neighbourhood that did not want him, nor he it. Would Fuji help? he had politely asked.

Would she! It was a tremendous relief to have him back safe, but now to be given the biggest, most satisfying compliment of her professional career in this way was extra special. She had hugged him, promised special coaching after school, and then driven him straight home for a wonderfully happy reunion with his mother, brothers and sisters. The scene had belied the caricature picture of single-parent homes as emotional, societal wastelands. She had seen more love in that one scene than she imagined many Ivy League families share in the whole of their emotionally retentive lifetimes. She simply could not wait to call Richard when she got home.

She did not notice the car, and was running up the steps to the entrance to her apartment when he caught up with her.

'Fuji,' he said. 'I've been waiting . . .'

The still-smiling face fell, and she felt her world cave in around her. It was Richard's Bureau SAC chief, and she knew it could only mean one thing. 'Is he alive? Is he alive!' she shrieked. Nothing else mattered. No amount of carefully chosen words counted for anything. Just one.

He knew this, and did not hesitate. 'Yes. He's alive.' He held his arms open for her, and she tunnelled into his bear hug, sobbing, knowing now there was more to come. 'He's shaken up pretty bad, but it's not life-threatening. A dislocated shoulder, pretty nasty bruising, glass cuts to his face and hands and temporary, we hope temporary, deafness. From an explosion and a fall.'

'I want to see him,' she said angrily, breaking away.

'I know. I've got your ticket for a flight out, leaving in a couple of hours. Details of the hospital and all are in the wallet,' he said, handing it to her. 'You want someone to go with you? Do you need meeting out there? A Bucar or anything?'

Snatching the wallet from him, she ran up the remaining entrance stairs. 'No. I don't need nothing. Nothing!'

The veteran agent sighed loudly and watched her go. He was too old a pro to feel hurt at her anger at him. It had to go somewhere.

And he had often had to give even worse news than this to wives of his men. It did not get any easier, though, and he knew it never would.

Blake could not stop thinking about the crude threat from Mitchell. Play ball on the Sool business, or the whole issue of the hammer drills will be out in the open. With all that entailed.

He was sitting at home trying to decide what to do. Getting up from the armchair, he poured himself another Scotch and went to the kitchen to check on a pre-cooked lasagne he was heating. It was overdone, and he scraped it on to a plate and took a tray back into the lounge. The Mahler CD on his expensive hi-fi matched his sombre mood. Chewing the rubbery pasta morosely, he rehearsed yet again the events of over four years earlier. Events of which he was not proud, and which he by now had really believed to be behind him.

One of Globecom's long-standing clients was Tungsten Hardware, a company with a good share of the UK market for powered household tools, such as drills, sanders, electric screwdrivers and saws. Blake was the director on the account, and a close and trusted adviser to the managing director. One evening he received a call at home from the MD. A fault had come to light in its biggest-selling model, an electric hammer drill. Several customers had complained about overheating motors, and one had reported his new drill giving off burning smells and smoking. Preliminary checks in the factory pointed to a small batch of motors from Tungsten's usual sub-contractor being wrongly wired. It was, the man estimated, no more than two hundred. They could trace about a third of them from returned guarantee cards. Most of the rest they could hunt down by liaising discreetly with the stores who were sent drills from the batch. Many would have been bought by credit card, and some using the customer loyalty club schemes run by the larger DIY sheds – both of which could also reveal addresses. The only alternative was the formal announcement of a full-blown product recall with trade and consumer press releases, advertisements giving warnings and trading standards officers crawling all over the company.

It could not have happened at a worse time. It was in the run-up to Christmas, the company's major selling period. Also, Tungsten was anxious to diversify, faced with formidable competition from Black & Decker and Bosch. Its market had now become far too

narrow for it to survive. The MD was therefore, at that precise time, in highly sensitive discussions with a potential purchaser, a French conglomerate interested in merging Tungsten with its own highly successful garden tools business. What to do? Recall? Or assume that the few units they could not trace – perhaps no more than twenty – would overheat a little, leading customers to return them for a no-quibble replacement?

Blake had slept on it before attending a meeting at the factory early the next morning. It had involved himself, the MD, the sales and marketing director and the production director. All but the production director knew about the discussions with the French. The debate about what to do was already polarised by the time Blake arrived. The MD and his sales and marketing director were both as one in rejecting a recall. The production director, a tin-basher engineer, was equally adamant that they must. After probing for more information, buying himself time, it was clear that all eyes were turning to Blake. His was not exactly to be a casting vote, but his professional judgment of the likely impact on the media and the hardware trade of a very public, high-profile recall – and there is no point in any other – would be pivotal in helping them reach a decision.

How Blake now wished he could revise what he had said. How he regretted not being stronger and more assertive, and doing what intuitively he had known was right. But at the time he told himself that these issues were never black and white, that the impact on Tungsten's workers and their families was also a factor if the secret French discussions were damaged . . . That even the production director, who had destruction-tested a couple of the faulty units in the lab, felt there was no real threat to life. That the risk was mathematically insignificant . . .

They first learned about the woman's death three weeks later, just before Christmas. It appeared in the regional press cuttings, from her local paper in Preston. She had been putting up a curtain pelmet with a new drill when she had been electrocuted. The coroner had mentioned the name of the drill in his statement, recording a verdict of accidental death. He had gone on to urge the wider use of circuit breakers when working with power tools, and called upon Tungsten and other manufacturers to do more to promote them. Rapid enquiries by Tungsten established that it was indeed a drill from the faulty batch, and they acquired it from the

distressed husband on the pretence that they wanted to use it to learn for the future. They even gave him a replacement – along with a circuit breaker, to help keep the coroner's conveniently misleading comments at the top of everyone's mind.

Tungsten, through Blake and Globecom, had subsequently issued a public, if suspiciously low-key, recall announcement in the period between Christmas and the New Year, a period when there is very little news. In fact the recall press release was actually sent out on Christmas Eve, and so avoided any coverage at all in either the nationals, which did not have issues until Boxing Day, or in the hardware retail trade magazines, which skip a couple of weekly editions over the holidays.

The production director had been especially distressed and guilt-ridden about what they had done, and was all for coming clean. Until the MD pointed out that if it became public, there was a very strong prima facie criminal case against all four of them for corporate manslaughter. And that meant jail.

Now, somehow, Mitchell had got to hear about the hammer-drill incident. After all this time. The only source could be the production director. He remembered that the man was a keen Territorial Army officer in his spare time. That could explain some kind of link back to Mitchell and his types, but he still could not understand why the man would want to confess and risk everything. That was all academic now, however. All that mattered was that Mitchell knew.

Another Scotch later, with the congealed, uneaten mess of the lasagne on the floor beside him, and the decision suddenly seemed obvious. Jail or Sool Kay-Sheen. It was no decision at all really.

It was the same kind of persistent knock as last time.

Richter scowled. Did they teach them that knock at police training school? 'Go away!' he shouted.

Still it continued. Padding to the door, he squinted through the spyhole Definitely a plain-clothes policeman. It was a different one this time. Older, but vaguely familiar. 'What do you want?' he demanded.

'Mr Richter? Sorry to trouble you. I just want to ask a few questions. Won't take a minute.' The tone was at least friendly. Polite, even, compared with the last lot.

Reluctantly opening the door, he let Templeton in. 'I've got no

more to say. My solicitor said I should speak nothing more until it gets to court.'

Templeton's mind raced, adjusting his planned approach to the confrontation as he digested what he had just heard. Richter was clearly out on bail for something, or possibly was just a witness at some hearing or other. Also, he obviously thought he was a detective, and had not yet recognised him from their last encounter over a year ago Time was too short for any patient interrogation, however. 'Nice bit of kit,' he remarked, still sounding friendly.

Richter beamed. Someone who understood a bit about computers. 'Yes. It's very powerful,' he said proudly, dusting the top of his bulky, professional-looking work station with his sleeve. 'It's got the Alpha sixty-four-bit chip.'

Templeton smiled, walked over to it as if to admire it, and then suddenly heaved the thing across the room with one almighty sweep of his gloved hand. The work station was plugged into a printer and that also crashed to the floor. Before Richter could utter a sound, Templeton had him pinned to the wall, his forearm pushing upwards at his throat, forcing him to stand on tiptoe. 'I'm no police officer, laddie,' he hissed menacingly. 'I'm the man who knows. The man who knows about you and Emily Wilkins. About Chiasmus. About the worm. The man who's going to stop you before you screw up the world's computers. Do you understand? Nod your ugly fat head if you do.'

Richter was having difficulty breathing, the sudden shock threatening to bring on an asthmatic attack. He nodded violently, terrified of the big man.

'Good. That's good,' Templeton said, easing the pressure a fraction. 'Now I want you to confirm that the two of you are threatening Chiasmus. That's right. I said that's *right*, isn't it?'

'No. I don't know what you're talking about,' Richter gasped, feeling the attack about to start.

Templeton let him go and picked up a handful of floppy disks littering the table. One by one he dropped them on the floor and stamped on each, splintering them. 'I don't think I heard right. Let me ask you just once more. And you can stop this destruction any time you like. Now. It is you two blackmailing Chiasmus and SGT, isn't it?'

Richter did all he could to will it away, but knew from long experience that it was hopeless. The familiar panic was rising in

him, the tightening of the chest, the numbness in his arms, his fingers. Then the coughing began. More a kind of rhythmic barking – regular, relentless, choking. But the breathing was the worst of it. He felt he could only breathe one way, only exhale However much he willed himself to calm down, the paralysis made it impossible to stop what was happening to him. His entire focus was involuntarily on the inevitability, the absolute certainty that he was about to gag to death. 'Inhaler,' he managed at last to mouth between coughs, waving an arm towards the bathroom.

Recognising what was happening, it was now Templeton's turn to feel frightened He had just meant to get a quick result out of the man, not cause something like this. Richter grasped the inhaler, put the mouthpiece between his teeth, somehow forcing himself to breathe in deeply, and waited for the drugs to work their usual slow magic. 'Are you all right? Do you need an ambulance?' Templeton asked.

To his relief Richter shook his head firmly, and waved him away. He was already becoming perceptibly better, the attack subsiding. Realising he had seriously overstepped the mark with the strong-arm tactics, Templeton looked around quickly and left. Like it or not, his next call, within the hour, would be on Miss Wilkins. Not an encounter to be relished, especially as she would by then be expecting him. He would have to do better than this if he was to stop them.

He was at the bottom of the stairs when he turned and ran back to Richter's flat. A quick look told him he was recovering quickly from the attack. 'Just one more thing,' he said, as he picked up the phone and traced its wall socket. Alongside it was another into which was plugged Richter's computer. Picking up a heavy brass paperweight, he tore out both leads and smashed the sockets, making them unusable. Standing up to admire his handiwork, he threw another cursory look at Richter and left If The German had remote access to Chiasmus, that at least would slow him down. And delay his call to`Emily Wilkins.

'How's the hearing coming along?' Pete Dandino asked, raising his voice.

'I can pick things up a little better now. But I get this ringing the whole time. They don't know for sure but it could be permanent. Tinnitus. It's driving me crazy,' Trent replied. He was sitting up in his private room in the hospital. 'But this is nothing to what happened

to the rest . . .' The huge bomb had killed everyone else on the raid – the technicians, the guard, the performers and all the SWAT team except himself and two men below covering the escapes. Had Trent not wandered off to the other end of the floor, had he not been near a window in direct line with the blast wave, then he would have gone with them. Part of him wished he had, to assuage the gnawing guilt, 'survivor's guilt', so familiar to all combat soldiers who watch their buddies return in body bags. The rest of him, however, was intent on finishing the job, on taking revenge for what had happened.

'Fuji's on her way. It must have shaken her pretty bad.'

'She called me from New York just before leaving, but I couldn't hear too well. She'll be fine.' The thought of seeing her really lifted him. 'So. What do we know?'

'It was an AMFO fertiliser bomb Huge thing. The kind the IRA have used in the past in city centres. Detonated remotely.'

'That's not what I mean.'

'I know.'

They sat awkwardly for a while, not talking. Each reluctant to confront the obvious. It was Trent who finally put their thoughts into words 'They were all ready, Pete. Like they were expecting us.'

'And I stayed in the van, right? I didn't join the raid like you said I could, right? It ain't you. It ain't my officer, otherwise why'd she tell us stuff in the first place. So that leaves me. Is that it?'

'You tell me!'

'I didn't go in because it was a SWAT mission. Those guys don't want outsiders, amateurs tagging along. They hate it. Ask them. I'm Vice Squad. My normal customers are hustlers shooting regulation mainstream action, the kind guys buy to try and turn on the wife. It's been a long, long time since I did any of your Hogan's Alley shit. I didn't want to get in the way. And, for the record, nor did I see the need to risk my ass.' Hogan's Alley is the mocked-up town at the FBI's main training academy, at Quantico, Virginia, used to act out operational situations.

'And, also for the record, I don't think you're on the take. Any more than I am, or your woman. It has to be something else,' Trent replied, to his relief. 'My best guess is they had the building covered by security cameras, monitored downtown, anywhere. They had the warehouse, and all the earlier locations, permanently rigged with explosives for exactly the kind of emergency they had last night. Once we'd gone in, they could detonate remotely. Evidence.

Witnesses. All damn nearly vaporised at the touch of a button. Bang. Gone. That's my guess. Have them look out for anything to support this as they sift through.'

Dandino visibly relaxed, the tension leaving his strained face. 'Thanks, pal. I needed that.'

'Sure,' Trent smiled. 'Now get out of here. I need some sleep before Fuji arrives.'

15

Madam. Your reasons for wishing to take revenge on me and my corporation are noted, and understood.

Whoever you are, I am in a way proud of you. What you say, and the strength of your proposed actions, shows that you are true family with SGT. Because real families care. They worry. They get angry when things happen that may damage that family. They are passionate. Instead of simply giving up, washing your hands on your family, you have decided to fight as hard as you know how. This is, if I may say so, quite Korean. We get angry, and as a race are known for taking extreme measures when we think it right Not for nothing are we known as the Irish of the East

But Confucianism is also Korean It orders much of how we behave. Allow me to explain a little. There are five superior to subordinate relationships. Ruler and subject, father and son; husband and wife; elder brother and younger brother; and friend to friend. I tell you this because as the ruler of our SGT family it is I who would normally expect your deference. As I have broken this relationship with you by my actions, then

it is to me personally that you must direct your anger. Not to your friends, your younger brothers and sisters, or to the father of your operating division. They have not done this to you. I have. Do not hurt your family. Do not release your terrible plague on them and their lives. Hurt me, if you must, but not the whole corporation. I will pay you money. Or tell me what else I must do.

Return your reply immediately, please. I await it. Chairman Sool Kay-Sheen.

Miss Wilkins reread the extraordinary message from the Internet remailer agency to the tiny, powerful notebook computer Richter had given her. She had never expected him to reply once, let alone twice. And she had certainly not planned for the man to start some kind of ethical, cultural dialogue with her. It was, she had to admit, really quite exciting. And a little heady too, with this powerful man pleading directly with her. It could, of course, be some attempt to trip her into revealing her identity, or that of the location they were first targeting. But she and Richter were going into Chiasmus for the last time that evening. It was too late for anyone to stop them now. By this time the following day, they would have 'let slip the worm of war', as it amused her to think of it. Then Sool and the rest would have their work cut out desperately trying to find an antidote, never mind stepping up the hunt for them.

While she still had time, she penned a reply.

Mr Sool. To hurt you I must, with many regrets, also hurt my friends – the family, as you call it. You are very wealthy and powerful, and cannot possibly know how it feels suddenly to find yourself an outsider, and rejected. To feel utterly worthless. A leper. Nor can you possibly understand it if I say that planning and working on this terrible act of revenge has been the only thing lending any meaning to my life. It has given me a purpose. A reason to be. Revenge can do this. Do not condemn what you cannot understand. I am not a young woman, and have nobody with whom to share the total despair I feel. Goodbye.

Carefully following the instructions written out for her by Richter, she sent her short message to the remailer for immediate forwarding to Sool. When she was sure it had gone she logged off-line, freeing

her telephone for the first time for twenty minutes. Richter, meanwhile, now almost recovered, had given up trying to get through to her on his mobile and was in the street outside his flat desperately trying to find a free cab. It was vital he forewarned her about the man. The man he now remembered. Chiasmus's security adviser.

The intercom suddenly rasped, and Miss Wilkins went into the hall and spoke into the handset. 'Yes?'

'Special delivery. For a Miss Wilkins.'

'Come up, would you. Third floor. There's a lift,' she replied, buzzing the front door open, puzzled as to what it might be, and returning to the sitting room to carry on tinkering with the dinky notebook.

A minute later, a voice boomed from the hall. 'You of all people, Miss Wilkins. Letting someone into the building claiming to be a delivery man. Without any checks. And then leaving your own front door ajar for him. You're far too trusting.'

She looked up, startled. 'Mr Templeton! What on earth . . .?'

'Routine enquiries, as I used to say in my days with the Met,' he replied without humour. He had noticed the notebook on the table, and the two leads out the back. Neither was a thick printer connection cable, almost certainly meaning that one was going into her telephone line. 'And how are you?'

'Never mind how I am. What *do* you think you're doing tricking your way in here?' She was at her imperious best, somewhere between Margaret Rutherford and Edith Evans. But behind the bravura her nerves were on edge. There *could* only be one reason for him being there.

Templeton sat down, uninvited. 'Oh, *really* . . . Not between you and me. Please.'

'I can't imagine what you're talking about.'

'I'm talking about you and Gerhard Richter. About blackmail. And about trespass, burglary, the Computer Misuse Act. Need I go on?'

She sat down herself. Then immediately stood up again. 'Coffee or tea?' she asked in order to buy a little time.

'Tea. Strong. Milk, two sugars.'

What to do? They should have gone with it last night. Why had she waited? Why . . .? Because before they released the worm she had felt the need personally to confront Sool with what she was doing,

and why. That was the whole point. It made no sense otherwise. She was *not* a blackmailer. She wanted nothing from anyone. Except perhaps the impossible – the re-creation of the old Chiasmus. Her Chiasmus. That was her real dream.

'If a person had done what you're accusing them of – hypothetically *if* – then what exactly would you like that person to do?' she asked archly, bringing in the drinks.

'If I knew a person like that,' he replied, playing along, 'then I'd tell them to stop immediately. Stop everything. Unless it was too late and they had already programmed in the worm. *Then* I'd tell that person to tell the fat little German creep they're working with to pass us the precise details of his program so that experts could make it safe. That's what I'd do. Because if that's what happens, and the thing is fixed before it does any harm, then I'm authorised to say we'd keep the police out of it. And we could all forget this ever happened. How does that sound?'

Sipping her tea, she thought for a moment and then decided to go on the offensive. 'It sounds to me as though you're flying kites, Mr Templeton. And have absolutely no evidence of anything. Beyond a feeling in those oh-so-experienced bones of yours. The ones that have been "watching and catching villains for thirty years", as you used to lose no opportunity of telling us all. Now let me tell you about the evidence *I* have. I have evidence of a man tricking his way into the apartment of an old spinster. And of a man accusing and threatening said old spinster, using knowledge gained as a police officer. Now, if I knew someone like this man, I'd advise him to leave. Right now. Before the frail old lady picked up a phone and called for help. That's what I'd tell such a man.'

Templeton was thrown, having expected her to cave in, not retaliate in kind. The thought that he might be wrong about both her and Richter suddenly returned. 'Think, Emily. Think! You *will* be caught. Before or after. And it could mean prison. Prison. You've no idea of the reality of what that means.'

They were words almost identical to those she had used with Richter. The thought of prison did make her shudder. She had briefly been a prison visitor herself, ten years earlier, drawn into it by a friend from church. It had depressed her too deeply, however, for her to be of much help, and she gave it up after just a few months. No one needed to lecture her on the true horrors of life behind bars. 'I'd thank you not to be so familiar, Mr Templeton. Miss Wilkins, if

you please. And I say again, please leave. Now. Before I call the police myself.'

He got up to go, and strode to the hall. 'Big mistake. *Big* mistake,' he repeated sadly, and was gone.

Slamming the door behind her, she ran to the phone to warn Richter that he would be on his way round. The number, however, was unobtainable, and she finally got the operator to confirm that there was a fault on the line. Next she tried to send him a message on the net, as he had shown her. But again she could not make a connection. As a last resort she found her diary and called his mobile number, fully expecting it to be switched off. Instead it rang and Richter answered. 'Gerhard. All your lines seem to be down. What's happening?'

'The security guy from Chiasmus, the one who caught me last time – he's been round. He smashed all my computers. And he knows about us. I couldn't get through to you on the phone. You were playing with the notebook, yes?' Unlike Richter, she had only one telephone number and, like a facsimile machine, the notebook computer took it over when in use on-line, giving engaged signals to anyone trying to call in.

'Yes, yes. But you say he smashed your place up? I don't believe it! Where are you now? Still there?'

'No. Of course not,' he snorted, his voice still sore from the violent asthmatic coughing. 'I am in a cab on my way to warn you. I am almost there, near the end of your street now. I see you in a moment.'

He was on the point of terminating the call. 'NO! Don't hang up!' she shrieked.

She had just caught him. 'What . . .?'

'If you're in my street crouch down on the floor of the cab. Out of view. Do it! Now! Templeton is just leaving here. If he sees you arriving he'll have all the proof he needs. Tell the driver to keep going!'

Richter did as he was told, with only seconds to spare. As the cab drove on past, he risked a cautious look out of the back window and saw Templeton leaving by the front door. '*Scheisse*! That was close!' he exclaimed. 'But it is becoming impossible now, I think. What shall we do? We must complete things tonight. It's our last chance. All this work . . . We must release the Helminth. We must! I have put so much into this. I will not let it die.'

Miss Wilkins's mind raced. Almost certainly Templeton would be having them both watched from now on, and security at Chiasmus must have been dramatically tightened. Why had she not agreed to go the night before? It was all so much more dangerous now. 'How difficult is it to release this thing? I mean, what actually do you have to do?'

'All the work is done. It just needs the program loading. Simple.'

'Simple like I could do it, or simple for a genius like you?'

He blew a raspberry noise. 'Pah! A child could do it. It's just a question of logging into one of the work stations and tapping in some instructions.'

'Very well I go in alone tonight They'll be looking for both of us, and you're far too conspicuous. Whereas I already seem to be part of the furniture. I've not been recognised so far, and people I know really well have looked straight through me. Tell me exactly what I need to do, so I can write it all down.' She was at her most self-confident and bossy again. Templeton had in the end irritated rather than frightened her. 'As for you, don't stay at your flat for a while. Go straight back there now and quickly grab whatever things you need. Find a new place for a few days. A small hotel. Guest house. Whatever. Maybe you shouldn't go back to the flat at all after today. We're both going to be watched. I'm pretty much a fixture, but there's nothing to stop you from disappearing. And then stay by your mobile all tonight, in case I have any problems. OK? Make sense? Right, then. Let's agree to meet tomorrow. One o'clock. At the Pizza on the Park. You know it? I'll tell you all about how it went. And we'll celebrate. Sound good? Fine. Then fire away with those instructions. Let's put this thing to bed.'

Mitchell had arranged to meet Blake for lunch at his club, the Travellers, sandwiched between the Athenaeum and The Reform on Pall Mall. Blake had never been there before and, having announced himself as a guest of Mr Mitchell, feeling dwarfed by the Doric-towered, high porter's desk, was now standing self-consciously in the hall, warming himself by the fire. The club had been the idea of Lord Castlereagh, then Foreign Secretary, and was founded in 1819 'to enable gentlemen who travel abroad to meet and to entertain distinguished visitors from overseas'. Architect Sir Charles Barry, best known for the ornate, late Gothic-style Houses

of Parliament, was commissioned to create a permanent home for the club, which was built between 1829 and 1831. He was also to construct the adjoining Reform six years later. To many, however, the Travellers was one of his finest works. Eschewing his love of the Gothic, he created a classically proportioned, understated Italianate palazzo building, but on a wonderfully human scale.

When Mitchell at last calmly walked in he was nearly ten minutes late. Without apologising, he suggested they went straight upstairs. The Travellers' dining room, known traditionally as the Coffee Room, is one of the most attractive in clubland, with pale yellow and pastel green walls, long and light. The head waiter welcomed Mitchell by name, and took them over to what he knew to be his favourite table at the far end, for once by a window. The relentless one-way traffic of Pall Mall below was barely a murmur. As they browsed through the menu, Mitchell explained that sadly the club was now a slightly longer hike than from his old Waterloo offices, perhaps as a kind of apology after all for being late

The only oasis near the new place for a decent claret and traditional English cooking was now just across Vauxhall Bridge, the Tate Gallery restaurant. He had got to know it years earlier when, as head of the merchant navy section at the SIS London station, he was round the corner on Vauxhall Bridge Road – at an address later to become the head office of Eddie Shah's *Today* newspaper. It has one of the best, and certainly the best-priced, wine lists in town. Unfortunately for gourmet spooks bored with 'the canteen', it was also packed each day with tourists and about as discreet as a railway carriage. On top of that, even its Whistler frescoes cannot disguise the fact that it is in a windowless cellar, and that alone was enough to put off many of Mitchell's more operationally active colleagues. It was Sir Dick Goldsmith White, when chief of the SIS, who once described his trade as 'a world without windows'.

Having chosen, Mitchell wrote their order out on the slip left by the waiter, and they began to talk once he had taken it away. 'I'm glad you've agreed to help. And I hope you'll put that hammer drill thing out of your mind. You'll understand that we often have to use a little encouragement. Especially since Matrix Churchill, Ordtec and all the rest.'

'I'm here to help. Tell me what you need.' Blake had no intention of becoming drawn into any matey-matey relationship with Mitchell.

The man held all the cards, and he was not about to forget it. He would feed them the information they asked for, but with a very long spoon.

'Well, to begin with, I want to know what Sool's up to with the Chinese. Then I want you to describe the man to me. The type of character he is. What pleases him. What drives him into one of his famous rages. I want to know about Jane Field, and what she knows about all this. And lastly, I'm going to ask you to make regular reports back to us. On life generally in the SGT camp. And sometimes on specific things we'll ask you to probe. Just give me the top-line answers today. But afterwards, I'm afraid I must request you make a more detailed written report. I'll assign someone to do it with you. OK?'

Blake told him all he knew, leaving out nothing except his developing relationship with Jane. Mitchell seemed especially interested in Sool's American activities, and asked him more about his hatred for the Japanese. Could he offer any reason for it, beyond normal Korean xenophobia?

'I agree there's something very strange about it,' Blake replied. 'It's the thing that makes him really irrational. I mean, he's passionate about everything, and pretty fiery. But on the Japanese thing, he's, well, not himself. Jekyll and Hyde. But then I don't know if I'll ever really understand the Korean mind, and what drives their leaders. Look at Roh.' He was referring to the arrest over two years earlier of the former President of South Korea, Roh Tae-woo. It was the result of a huge scandal over payments of some £200 million allegedly made by some of the leading *chaebol* chairmen. 'People have told me they think it has to have something to do with his short disappearance a couple of years ago. Nobody can explain it, but it seems to have changed him, following the visit by his aunt. You've heard about that?'

'It's been referred to in a few business magazines,' Mitchell said. 'But Sool won't talk about it, I know. What's the gossip on this from his people, or Jane Field?'

'It's a taboo subject. Nobody talks about it. Nobody.'

'Not even Miss Field? A fellow Westerner? You must have asked about it.'

'No. Not at all.'

Mitchell noticed that Blake seemed suddenly prickly. His lightning

intuition told him why. Something to note for future use. 'And you. What's your theory?'

'I've thought about it. I mean, it's a factor in what I'm trying to do for him. If he suddenly cracks up in front of the world media, or bites the head off a Japanese journalist, then we've got a problem,' Blake replied with feeling. 'My only theory is that maybe his aunt told him about some hereditary illness. I don't know what. A congenital heart disease. Something. Perhaps he had himself checked over, and found he hasn't got long to live. That makes some sense to me. Sool seems to me to do everything as if he was cramming it all into a short time left to him. I know that doesn't explain the Japanese thing. But who knows what news like that would do to you? If he'd always resented them, then maybe he hated them all the more when robbed of a future. But why are you so interested in this and his US operations?'

Mitchell gave him an outline of the serial killings, and the videos. After that they ate in silence for a while. Each had chosen partridge. It was excellent, but neither noticed, chewing morosely, thinking about how what they had exchanged impacted on their own next moves. Blake's theory was as good as any Mitchell had himself formulated. He would pass it on to the Americans to check out through their Seoul station. It was what he had heard about Sool's plans with the Chinese that was really alarming him, however. It would cause serious instability in the financial markets, and add to the tension in the region, already high following the handover that summer of Britain's former colony, Hong Kong. The UK's economic and political interests in the area remained significant and many, not least in the Foreign Office, the SIS's own sponsoring ministry, still felt a degree of responsibility for the citizens they had just left behind. Some would say abandoned. Add this to the intelligence from Moscow, about some other outrage, and it was crystal clear that something had to be done about Sool. And fast. 'We've got to stop this Chinese deal with SGT. You know that. It's highly destabilising for the world markets. And as for Japanese reaction, the buggers are either at your feet or your throat. And a humiliated Japan is a dangerous Japan.'

'It won't be easy. There's too much riding on it. Huge stakes. Stop the deal somehow, and you're going to bust SGT. Worldwide. Virtually overnight. There'd be a huge margin call at the end of the trading day which they would not be able to meet. Given the new

mood in Korea towards the *chaebol*, since all the Roh business, you can be sure the government won't attempt any kind of rescue package. They'd let them go. It would be one of the biggest crashes this side of the 1930s. If you want that kind of responsibility, that's up to you. I'm damn sure I don't.'

Mitchell realised that Blake was right Political alarm bells were ringing loudly. He could only imagine the reaction of the DTI, and indeed the Prime Minister, if it became known that the security services had helped destroy all those hard-earned jobs in politically sensitive regions, attracted by millions of pounds of taxpayers' money. And that was just the UK. SGT employed thousands across the EU as a whole, and also in the struggling Eastern European states. This was a decision he would have to take upstairs. First to his own chief and, assuming he agreed, on to the Cabinet Office Joint Intelligence Committee. It would need an early meeting inside the depressing secure cell. Suddenly there was a lot of paperwork ahead of him. 'Finished?' he asked. 'Well, then. I think we'd better skip coffee downstairs and make a start. We've got a lot to do. Because this trip of yours to Hong Kong is becoming more and more important by the minute '

Blake stood up to go. The trip was important for all kinds of reasons, not the least of which for him was Jane. If Sool was really behind the series of murders, he simply had to get her away from him. Straight after Hong Kong. He realised now, despite their short time together, just how much she was in his thoughts. Barely an hour went by without him thinking about her with an almost adolescent fixation. He had not felt like this for a very long time. He had to help her leave Sool, that at least was clear. What he really could not read were her real feelings about him Equivocal, puzzling, contradictory . . . all that. But given half a chance and a little space, he thought she could learn to relax and trust him – and more.

As Mitchell paid the bill at the cashier's desk, his own mind was as distracted as that of Blake. The murders, the threatened terrorist outrage, the money market turmoil, the economic attack on Japan . . . It all led back to Sool. But months of painstaking work by the FBI had so far not got them even close to finding indictable evidence against him. His own efforts for British security had now, through Blake, at least produced high-grade intelligence of the imminent Chinese deal, yet he knew that Blake had been right. The threat to British and European Union jobs could be a

hot enough political potato to stymie any preventive action being taken. He knew from bitter experience that information, however sound, is often ignored if it flies in the face of Whitehall's prejudices and Westminster's short-term political imperatives. And the news about Sool did both.

Somebody had to stop Sool, however. If the FBI couldn't and the British government wouldn't, just who else was there?

> Madam. I have your message. Do not please think you are the only person to have suffered in life. Your message to me says I cannot possibly understand how it feels to be an outsider, or the desire for revenge. These are indeed ironic statements to me. If only you knew how much we are the same. If only I could explain to you the tragedy that is now my life. I am not what I seem to you. I am worthless and, like you, live only for revenge. To right a wrong. Give me a little more time – just two weeks – before you attack me, this I ask. Let me right this wrong, then my worthless carcass is yours on which to feed. I will have no more use of it. We are alike you and I. Grant me this one request. I await your reply immediately. Day or night you can contact me. Or better still let us talk on my satellite phone. It is secure, I give my word. Here is the number: 00871 226124691. No longer your ruler. Or father. But perhaps equal Confucian friend. S K-S.

Miss Wilkins was just on her way out to Chiasmus for the last time when the latest net message came in from Sool. It was even more extraordinary than the last. He was pleading, and talking to her now as an equal. And opening up to her, just like one of her old Chiasmus colleagues with a personal problem for her to help solve. He sounded almost suicidal. Whether it was an act or not, after Ian she wanted no more unnecessary deaths. Must she always become a kind of corporate confessional? she thought despairingly. She just had time to dash off a short reply to the remailer to ease her conscience as much as possible.

> S K-S. Your message is moving. I am a compassionate woman, and will take no real pleasure in what I too must do. To right a wrong, as you put it so well. I will talk to you soon. It would perhaps help both of us to understand and in time possibly to forgive. But this will be after what must happen. I have no choice

in the timing. Perhaps you know this already. I will call you tomorrow. But until then understand that no life is worthless. Whatever your great tragedy, never forget this. I may hate some of your actions, but it is clear that you are a remarkable man with great talents. Your challenge is to use them more wisely and compassionately. We must both try and complete the solemn tasks we have set ourselves, and then rebuild our lives to make them positive once more. Your friend.

Her building had a passage off the ground-floor hall leading to the back door. Moving quickly, she let herself out and made her way circuitously to Highbury and Islington Underground station for the journey south to Victoria. Templeton or one of his people would surely be watching the front of her flat. She had left the lights and TV on, as well as switching on her facsimile machine so that any callers would not become suspicious if they tried to ring in. She was now more nervous than she had been even on her very first night as a cleaner at Chiasmus. They would certainly have stepped up security, and all of a sudden she felt far less confident about not being recognised. Also, Saturdays – although a normal working day – were slightly quieter than weekdays, and there would be greater risk of more thorough vetting.

Sure enough, there was a second security guard on the desk alongside one of the regulars, the surly Nigerian. Taking a deep breath, she walked over confidently to sign in as usual. The Nigerian seemed to look at her properly for the first time, and her heart pounded so loudly she was sure they must be able to hear the thing. 'She a regular?' the younger man asked. He looked keen and sharp.

'A regular. Yes,' the Nigerian said in his slow, laboured English.

'You got some identification, Miss – what's that say? – Johnson, is it?' the younger guard asked. 'Letter, credit card, building society book. Anything like that'll do.'

Miss Wilkins fought to keep a calm front. 'I don't think I've got anything on me. I don't carry much being out late and all.'

'Well, we're going to have to find something. What's in your bag? Let's have a look.'

Inside, she knew, was a telltale small leather wallet containing her credit card and driving licence. Without showing any sign of the reluctance she felt, she unzipped the plastic shopping bag and

made to tip out the contents. As she did so she dropped the bag, spilling everything on the floor, hidden from the guards by the reception desk. Cursing her clumsiness, she stooped and palmed the wallet down her blouse, seconds before the guard moved round to help her. 'Sorry. All fingers and thumbs lately. A touch of arthritis,' she complained, still trying desperately to think of a way to prove herself to be E. Johnson. Only one idea came to her. It had risks, but it was all she could think of in the time.

'So. What have we got?' he asked, rummaging through her things now on the counter. 'A paperback. Mints. Packet of tissues. A hairbrush. Toilet water. Keys. And a couple of apples. Panadol. But no ID. I mean, you could be a real villain for all we know! But, sorry, there's a flap on, and we can't let anyone in at all without a security card or some proof of identity.'

She smiled back at him. 'Hardly be here every night cleaning if I was a successful villain,' she joked. 'You could call my home and ask my sister to give you my description. It's in the book if you want to check. Eunice Johnson. Pembroke Way, Pimlico.' She gave him the number. 'But you look it up and see.' She had thought of her friend Eunice that first night when she had come up with a name to sign in the book. Eunice, of course, knew nothing of this. If he rang and talked to her, it would all be over. But there was a fair chance that he would just look up the name and address and leave it at that. And also a good possibility that Eunice would be out even if he did call.

He looked at her curiously, and then away over her shoulder as two more people came in and started walking over to the desk. 'Eunice Johnson. OK. Let's see.' He took out the central London residential telephone directory from behind the desk and began to look for the name. There was a column and a half of E. Johnsons, and he had to search for Pembroke Way. But sure enough, eventually he found it. 'Look after these two, will you, while I make the call,' he said to the Nigerian. Moving over to the phone, he tapped in the numbers. Miss Wilkins held her breath, willing Eunice to be out. Please. Please. She was always out when *she* rang. At the opera. Out for dinner. Seeing some foreign film . . . Please be out tonight too. She could hear the ringing tone. Please don't let it stop.

'Boss, these people say they have an appointment with some folk, but it's not on the list here,' the Nigerian called.

The young man looked puzzled. The two men were in business

suits and looked as though they could be customers Miss Wilkins's hearing was suddenly acute, tuned in, and she heard the dialling tone stop and Eunice's husky voice answer 'Yes?'

What to do now? Run out while he was distracted and abandon everything, or brazen it out somehow?

Still holding the phone, now at arm's length, the guard started asking the men who they were there to see. Miss Wilkins decided to be bold and grabbed the handset from him. 'I just remembered something I forgot to tell my sister,' she said. 'Won't be a mo'.' Still distracted, he carried on trying to sort out the two important-looking men, while Miss Wilkins quickly whispered to Eunice who it was, and asked her to play along that she, Emily, was in fact Eunice, and Eunice her sister at home Got it? She would explain all tomorrow. Promise, darling Just a bit of fun. Eunice was no fool, and did not buy Emily having a 'bit of fun' in any way that could remotely involve her lying about her identity. She was a very quick thinker, however, and agreed to play along. Emily had to be in some sort of trouble.

Handing the guard the phone back, Miss Wilkins muttered something about telling her sister where she had left a prescription. He had lost interest in her by now, and only cursorily asked Eunice if she was Miss Johnson's sister. Not even bothering to request a general description, he thanked her, hung up and waved Miss Wilkins through with a warning that in future she must have some proof of identity. Heart still pounding, she fled to the lift and to her floor. Molly Spink was waiting for her, looking worried. She explained that Templeton and his men had demanded a list of all the cleaners, and she knew the same request had also been made earlier to the catering supervisor. They were all going to be checked, like everyone else It had been worrying her silly.

'This is my last night. And Gerhard won't be seen here again,' Miss Wilkins told her, to Molly's obvious relief. 'You must simply give false addresses for us both. I'll write some down for you. Then you can simply say you're as puzzled as anyone else about who we were, if you're pressed. OK? And Molly, thank you. A very big thank you. I know it was a lot to ask, and it has meant a great deal to me. I won't forget it. Now, best leave me. I hope to be out in an hour, leaving my floor uncleaned, I'm afraid.'

'Good luck, and God bless,' Molly said simply.

The blessing on what she was about to do sat uncomfortably

with Miss Wilkins as she went to her old PC and tapped in her log-in codes. To her horror, access was denied. They had at last got round to changing them and making the machine secure. Feeling a rising panic, she took out the instructions dictated to her by Richter. But these assumed that she could log in as usual. Hand shaking, she called him on his mobile. He answered immediately. When she had explained her problem he snorted, told her to find any machine left logged on and to use that. She hung up and looked around the floor. For the first time she could ever remember, they were all switched off. There had obviously been a massive security blitz that day. Even more panicky, she rang him again. This time he thought for a while before replying. At last he said, 'Go to the work station I used. The one out of view in the corner, near the lavatories. I programmed in my own remote codes. They may have changed those of the official user, but mine will still be in there. Almost for sure. Write them down. TFWXNC, and PFWDLJ. Go ahead. Give my baby birth.'

She fled across, switched on the PC, and waited for it to ask her for the codes. Carefully entering them, she closed her eyes and opened them a few seconds later to see if they had been accepted. They had! She was logged in. With trembling hands she followed Richter's set of instructions precisely, typing in the commands. Seconds later the machine had found and retrieved the complex and deadly program he had hidden in there. It was asking whether or not she wanted it inputted. She typed in Y, and pressed Enter.

The machine then asked her to confirm the instruction, just as Richter said it would. This was really it! If she said yes once more the vampire worm would begin its voracious life. The Helminth from Hell. It was a frightening decision to have to take. Despite all the work they had put in, the finger on the trigger was hers and hers alone. Richter had been a functionary. She had used him. This was her decision, and one she would have to live with all her life.

Standing up, she heard a commotion from the lifts across the floor. A security guard was walking towards her, followed by someone hidden behind him. He was not in uniform. Then she caught sight of who it was. Templeton was striding across the floor in her general direction. Now they were running . . .

She looked down and reached out with the index finger of her right hand.

• • •

The flight from New York to Los Angeles had seemed even longer than normal to Fuji Trent. She had managed a few snatched words with him before setting off, but that had not reassured her. He had always lied to her about his health. She would not relax until she had seen him with her own eyes.

Rushing off the plane, she pushed her way through the crowds with her hand baggage, and headed for the exit to get in line for a cab. At the meet-and-greet area, however, she saw a man holding a card with her name. She had not expected this, but was pleased nonetheless that they had sent someone. It would get her there more quickly.

'I'm Fuji Trent,' she said to him. 'Are you taking me to my husband?'

'Yes, ma'am. County-USC. The car's out front. Let me take that. Follow me.' The short-haired, clean-cut rookie took her bag, and set off at a fast pace. Outside, he waved over the car, put her bag in the trunk and got in the back with her, locking the doors.

It was half an hour before she was sure they were not going the right way. 'This doesn't seem the best route,' she protested. She had already begun to feel that something was wrong.

Neither man had spoken to her, or responded to her own comments and questions.

'Relax and enjoy the ride,' the man beside her said at last. 'Because this is about as enjoyable as it's going to get. And don't try and struggle. I've been asked not to damage you.'

Fuji went cold with fear She also felt stupid for not having checked him out before getting in the car. 'Who are you? What do you want?'

'We want you to tell your husband to get out of our face,' he replied, matter-of-factly. 'And we figured the best way to do that is for you to make him a cute little video. How's that sound?'

She sank her head in her hands as the memory of that nightmare tape came back to her yet again. It could not be happening to her. Not this. Dear God, not this.

16

Clara's apartment was a little like Clara herself. A cocktail of ethnic influences, superficially glamorous, but unruly and untidy beneath. They had just returned from an early lunch at La Côte Basque and were relaxing and gossiping The two of them did not get together enough, one or the other seemingly always abroad somewhere, and when they did have the time they pigged out on each other's company.

'I envy you and Annie,' Jane said. 'I know you guys fight, but it must be so good to know deep down you always have someone on your side. Someone who will always be there for you.' All models smoke too much, and the room was already billowing.

'Yeah. She's kind of an anchor. Something real in the crazy world I still live in. At least you're virtually out of modelling now.'

'Don't be so sure. I've had a call from the agency. They've got interest in me from L'Oréal. For some new campaign aimed at "women not girls", as they delicately put it. Lauren Hutton kind of thing, I guess.'

Clara leaned over and felt Jane's breasts, playfully tweaking a

nipple. 'You've still got the tits,' she laughed. 'What is it? Big bucks? You tempted?'

'Yes. The money's good. They want a three-year exclusive deal. And sure I'm tempted. Why not?'

'Why not! Because this business drove you nuts. That's why not. Don't do it. If you don't need the money, then you certainly don't need the hassle.'

Jane frowned. 'I need something back in my life. I'm vegetating.'

'What about the English guy?'

'That just sums up what I mean. I'm clutching at straws. We've had a real quick thing. My idea, because I was *bored* out of my mind by K-S. And sick of him constantly watching over me. Spying. And John's real nice and everything. But look at me. I'm living in a dumb dreamland, wondering if some guy I barely know might just give some meaning to my life. I mean, come on. It's too pathetic for words. I've got to get a grip on myself again. I've been off the sauce for ages now. I can *do* it. I can get my career started again.'

'Yeah, yeah. But what's he like? Have you got a picture?' Clara asked, mischievously. She had heard Jane's 'I'm gonna get a grip' speech before.

Jane tucked her legs under her and smiled. 'No, I don't have a picture,' she replied in a mock-disinterested voice. 'But he's kind of ordinary-looking. Late thirties, early forties, I guess. Medium height, not fat, not thin. Dark hair. A lived-in sort of face. Kind eyes. You know. Like that.'

'And what's so special?'

'Give me a break. I don't know *anything's* so special. You know me. When I'm in the mood I'll grab what I want for a night. Always have, before the Creature frightens them off. But he's good to be with. He doesn't take any crap from K-S, like everyone else I meet. And he's funny. Funny-amusing funny. Also, his world isn't so different to ours. PR and modelling. It's all about image, confidence, presentation. He understands. I don't need the Creature when I'm with him. I'm enough, and that's kind of nice.'

'Has he got one of those machines?' Clara asked, nodding towards her videophone. 'If so, let's get the guy on screen so I can inspect him.'

Jane looked at her watch. It would be early Sunday evening in

London. 'He's a big cheese executive type, so I imagine he might – if he's home. Let's try.'

She found his card in her pocket-book and dialled his home number. He answered it immediately. 'John Blake.' The voice sounded tired.

'Has it been a long day?' she asked

'Hallo, you!' he replied, recognising her voice. 'Long day or short nights. Same thing. And how are things with you?'

'Have you got a videophone thing at your end? I'm at a friend's, and we have one.'

'Yes. I can link up with a picture on my PC. Give me a second.' Sure enough, after a short delay, her small screen flickered, and there he was 'How's tha. . .? Well there you *are*. Hi!'

She laughed 'Hi! And, hey, come over here . . . Hey, John! Say hi to Clara.' The two girls pressed their heads together and made grotesque faces, giggling uncontrollably. 'She's a model too!'

'I can see that,' he laughed, crossing his eyes and also pulling a face.

They all spoke about nothing very much for a while, until Blake became a little more serious. 'I was going to call you soon anyway, Jane About something kind of confidential. So it's good you're not on Sool's phone.'

Clara good-naturedly took the hint, gave Jane an encouraging 'O' sign with her thumb and forefinger, and disappeared into the kitchen, shouting, 'Is *that* the time? I *must* make some coffee!'

'Can we talk?' he asked.

'Sure Clara's made a theatrical exit stage left What is it? You sound serious about something.'

'I still don't want to say too much over the phone. I'll explain everything when we get together in Hong Kong. I fly out tomorrow.'

'Things have changed at my end. I'm now going to be travelling out alone. Arriving Wednesday. K-S is travelling on from somewhere.'

'Great. That's really great. We can have some time together. But I have to talk to you about Sool right now. Just trust what I say, and you can ask me all you need when I see you. OK?'

'I guess. What is it? You're worrying me.'

'Sool is not just, well, eccentric. I've told you. He's dangerous.

A very dangerous man. But much more so than either of us imagined.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean he's thought to be involved in having people killed. Young women. Young Japanese women. And this deal he's got me helping on, that's dangerous too. It's all about attacking the Japanese. He's betting the whole of SGT on it.'

She was quiet for a while, and drifted out of the camera angle. Things were no longer funny. 'How do you know about all this, the talk of killings? He gets violent, but I don't believe he could kill anyone.'

'It's from the . . . the police. They seem pretty sure, but haven't yet got enough to do anything.'

'So what are you telling me? What should I do?'

'You'll be seeing him next in Hong Kong, right? He's not coming back to New York?'

'Like I said, he's travelling.'

'Good. We can look after you in Hong Kong. But I think you should plan to leave him as soon as this announcement is made. It's your call. But you should get out of this thing as soon as it's fairly safe to do so. And in the meantime, I could use some help.'

'Shoot.'

'Well, the police people need to know things. Like why Sool is *so* anti-Japanese. And what was it that changed him two years or so ago. Was it that visit from his aunt? And if so, exactly what was it she told him? They need to find a way to stop him, and without any real evidence, they need some leads like these to follow. Can you help? Do you know anything about all this?'

'No. He's never opened up to me about these types of things. Just as I don't talk to him or anyone about my drinking history. It's a cross you bear alone, or at best with your analyst. These are things you're ashamed of, you know? You *don't* talk about them. That's kind of the point.' Her mind was running ahead, trying to think of some way to help. 'The only thought I have is his safe, in the Trump Tower apartment. I know he keeps important papers in there. But I don't have the combination.'

'Who else does?'

'As far as I know, only his personal assistant, Park. He's over here with him sometimes.'

The surnames Park and Kim are extremely common in Korea and Blake only casually asked, 'What are his other names?'

Jane went to her pocket-book again and found the card. 'Chang-Hyun. Park Chang-Hyun.'

'A young man, thirtyish, slim, spiky hair? Wears bow ties?' Blake asked, surprised. He thought that CH was based in Frankfurt as a European co-ordinator. If he was really Sool's main aide this began to put a different complexion on his own appointment as an adviser.

'That's him. Why? Is it important?'

'It might be. Look, is there any way you could get the combination off Park? Any way you could get into that safe? Without putting yourself at risk.'

'I can't imagine how,' she replied. 'I don't even know if Park's still here. But I'll give it some thought.'

'I'll put people from the FBI in touch with you. Is that all right with you?'

She was not at all sure, but heard herself saying, 'The FBI? If you think it's that important, I guess so.'

'It *is* that important. Trust me.'

'Let me get this straight once more. She was definitely on the flight. It landed on time three hours ago. She hasn't been in touch with her parents here. And she's called no one. That's what you're telling me. Is that right?' Trent was torn between raw anger and despair.

'That's about it, Richard. But she's got family and friends all around L.A. She might have called in on someone before coming here.' Pete Dandino was one unhappy man. First the raid had gone horribly wrong, now they had 'lost' Trent's wife. He already felt bad about the squad fatalities and Trent's injuries, and now he was racked with an additional all-pervading sense of guilt. Logical or not, he felt it should be him lying there, and him worrying himself sick about his own wife.

'The only people she might have seen would have been her parents. Period. If you tell me they haven't heard from her, then she's missing. She'd want to see me as soon as she possibly could. Nothing else makes sense. Nothing.'

Dandino knew he was right. 'We already have an APB out, and I've got men at the airport and with the cab drivers asking around. Nothing so far. Good or bad. I've also got a monitor on your line

here, in case you get some kind of ransom call. The guard on you has been strengthened. If she is missing, it could be unrelated . . . But we have to assume not. I'm sorry, Richard. I don't know what to say.'

Trent fought to keep the anger out of his voice. Cold professionalism was what would get her back, not seeing red and getting mad. 'And Arnold Beeker. The porn video king. When do you bring him in?' If Fuji had been taken in reprisal for the raid, it all pointed first to Beeker, and on directly to Sool.

'Better news there,' Dandino replied more brightly. 'I forgot to tell you because of all this. Your hunch was right. We did find security cameras in the wrecked building, and better yet, they've led us to an office in downtown L.A. where they were being monitored. An office we can tie in to Beeker's empire. We're raiding it tonight. And picking up Beeker at the same time. If he's got anything to do with Fuji's disappearance, believe me, we're going to know '

'Get her back. Fast,' Trent said, holding the other man in a level, slightly distant gaze. 'By the book if you must. Or whatever. Because if you don't, I will.'

'Got it,' Dandino said. He knew Trent was serious. 'We'll find her. That's a promise.'

They were both early, Richter by a full half-hour, and he was already waiting at the table, beer in hand, when she arrived at the Pizza on the Park.

'I really thought I was going to get caught,' Miss Wilkins told him, still shaken. 'Templeton came rushing in my direction and I was certain he'd recognised me.'

'What happened?' Richter asked, shocked.

'I just had time to prime the program and switch off the monitor, so that as they came near me I was already kneeling, emptying waste bins. They just went by me at a pace, and into Mann's office, obviously looking for something. Damned close! But I did it. I really did it! The program is under way.'

'I know this. I know!' Richter was clearly on a high.

'How do you know? How can you?'

He grinned and took a swig of beer. 'Because it's started already. Helminth has had a whole night to gather strength. From the sleeping network computers. I know someone working at Chiasmus today, and called him an hour ago Mann and Templeton are both in.

Screens are down everywhere. The system's crashing around them. We've done it! Champagne now, I think.'

Miss Wilkins was nervous, terrified now by what she had unleashed 'Gerhard, tell me again exactly what is likely to happen now.'

'It is like the measles. All the PCs in Chiasmus's network will infect each other All spotty. Ha! The server will crash. And my program will go on and spread around the world, through links between all SGT companies, and Seoul. It will also travel to suppliers and some customers. So the Helminth will fan outside to other compatible computers, and through the outside computers to others linked to them we don't even know about.

'The first they will know is the machines slowing down, and text falling off screens like dandruff, as Helminth uses up their power Then they will crash. Great swathes of memory will be lost. Hard discs will be wiped clean, and the worm will also spread and mutate through floppy disks. Helminth will log-jam the world. They will try to find a cure for the measles, but I am clever. Cleverer than all the others who have done this before. They will first send a warning, a virus posting on the net to warn compatible systems users. Then they will create a virus to try and catch up Helminth, and eat him. Like a Pac-man game When this fails, they will have to decompile Helminth. This is like taking him apart, painstakingly, from each minuscule instruction that makes up the whole. The Americans have the best people at doing this. If they find a weakness in my program then they have a chance to stop him eventually But I don't think there is any weakness. I don't think so.'

'You said you're cleverer than all the others. Has anything like this happened before?'

'On this scale? Not really. The nearest was a worm put on the VAX and Sun systems, on the Internet. That was really a kind of mistake. Back in 1988 in the States. RTM was this young guy's code. Robert Morris. His program, his worm, was called "daemon". It hit them on 2 November. A day that systems managers all over the States will never forget. Some estimated the damage caused was over $95 million. But computer crime is big everywhere now. Here in Britain the London Business School worked out that hacking was costing industry some £400 million a year. In the States the National Computer Security Association estimated that in 1994 $2.7 billion was lost to computer virus infections.

'But the person closest to what we're doing is the Dark Avenger himself.' Richter spoke now in a reverential tone about one of his heroes. 'This is a Bulgarian genius, a young kid who decided to take revenge on his bosses. They had used him to break the protection programs of Western software they were pirating. Really difficult stuff. Then when he had finished he found out they were going to sack him. So he created a brilliant destroyer virus and fed it into the computers in his labs in Sofia. It has since spread all over the world attacking companies, banks, insurance companies and military installations. Even Bulgaria's secret police!'

'And our worm. Can no one stop it now?'

'Only me. *Maybe* me. I'm not even sure of that now. This is a very clever program, based on randomisation. Helminth has a mind of his own now. Our child has grown up and left home.'

Their conversation became desultory after that, Miss Wilkins changing the subject, not wanting to keep thinking about what they had done. She should have felt better. After all, that was the whole point of revenge. Yet guilt was the overriding sensation, and she did not like it one bit. Richter told her he was leaving that evening for a trip to Glasgow. There was some kind of computer hack fest that he had been thinking of going to anyway. Some Dutch friends were planning to be there. It was a follow-up to a controversial conference, Access All Areas, held earlier at London's King's College, attended partly by hackers from Europe.

She had made Richter promise to stay available on his mobile phone, and they arranged to meet again in London when the police decided about charging him for the mailing list fraud. Then she made her way to the nearby Lanesborough Hotel. She had decided to call Sool, as he had been asking her to do She was not really able to say why, except that it might somehow make her feel a little better about herself. Her self-esteem was at a very low ebb, and it was making her miserable. She needed to confront what she had done. Entering the luxurious, Texan-owned hotel, she went into the long bar to the left, ordered a coffee and asked where she could make a private call She knew she must not call from home, as tracking numbers was now so easy. Once installed in the booth, she took out a number of pound coins and dialled the long Sat-phone number Sool had given her. She had no idea where he was or what time it might be there. He had said it did not matter, however, and she decided to take him at his word. Frighteningly

quickly, she heard the strange dialling tone and his voice answer over the echoing delay.

'Mr Sool. You asked me to ring any time. This is the lady corresponding with you on the Internet.'

'Oh, really? Good. Excellent. I'm pleased you have called.'

'Perhaps you should not be pleased. I warned you that I could not wait before I released the computer worm. I have to tell you that it is now free, and active in your company's systems. It will do great damage.' Her voice was strong and self confident, masking her inner doubts

I have been receiving some reports from England. About computers slowing and crashing. And about a nice English lady and a German hacker. I am pleased to speak directly with you at last . . . Miss Wilkins. It is Miss Wilkins, isn't it?'

She was thrown off balance by this. Templeton must have reported his strong suspicions about them. 'You can make up whatever names for me you wish.'

'Then I will call you Miss Wilkins. I even have your photograph and a dossier on you. I feel I know you already. And I know why you are doing this to me. You blame me for your losing your job. This I understand.'

'You understand nothing!' she snapped. 'I am not doing this out of pique Out of some petty desire for personal revenge. I'm doing it because I want to stop you, and people like you, from taking over and destroying companies about which you know little, and care even less. Because I want to reverse what you've done and somehow re-create something I spent my life helping to build.'

'You cannot turn back time. Chiasmus was sick. A low-profit, over manned sick company. If I had not come along, someone else would have. Or it would have slowly died on its own through bad management, low-calibre people and inefficiency.'

'So badly managed that it has taken just two of its "low-calibre people" to bring down your entire corporation, Mr Sool. The work of *your* lifetime. How does it feel?'

'Do not flatter yourselves. I have my top computer experts in Korea already working on an antidote to your amateurish virus '

'Worm,' she corrected. 'You should get your terminology right. A virus is a parasite feeding off a host organism, off another program. A worm can travel independently, on its own. The Helminth from Hell is a *worm*.' She had recited Richter's words parrot fashion,

but she was damned if she was going to let this irritating man patronise her.

'And what would it take for you to call back this worm of yours?' he asked. 'We will defeat it, but your attack happens to have come at a sensitive time for me. For reasons you cannot possibly know. How much do you want?'

'This is not about money. I've told you that. It's about, well, righting a wrong. That's your own phrase, remember?'

'And the only way to right your wrong is to destroy me?'

'It's enough for now. And you? Are you not righting some wrong of your own? Are you not also destroying something or someone? You told me your life was now a tragedy. I do not understand why. I do not know what your tragedy is. But perhaps I can understand how you feel. As for me, I take no pleasure in my retribution. It shames me, even though I cannot stop myself. Because you are wrong about this worm. It is stronger than you realise. You will not be able to stop it.'

'The next few hours will decide that, Miss Wilkins. It has not done very much damage yet. Please call me again in five hours. Will you do this? Please?'

'I will.'

The car had driven straight into the warehouse of the low, modern building in Anaheim, thirty-five miles south east of Los Angeles International. It was an empty electronics factory, on a short rent. Fuji had by now stopped any attempt to struggle and resist, at least physically It was clear they were prepared to hurt her. Once, when they had stopped at a red light, she had screamed and attracted the attention of a man in a car alongside. He looked briefly, caught a threatening stare from the man holding her, and quickly faced to the front again before accelerating away hard when the lights changed. The expert fingers that found and dug hard into a pressure point on her neck caused excruciating, blinding pain, and she needed none of the man's threatening obscenities to convince her not to try that again.

They manhandled her through the cold, empty warehouse, into the office wing and in an elevator up to an empty room. There was not even a chair, just the detritus of old papers, discarded files, a three-year-old wall calendar and the general mess left by the person working there when the removal men came. Keys jangled

as the door was locked, leaving her alone. She immediately went over to try the handle. It would not move. A firm shoulder push established that her 123 pounds were going to make no impression on the solid door. Next she went to the window. There was no lock on the catch and she opened it with some difficulty to look out. The room was on the second floor, and with no outside piping to shimmy down, escape looked impossible without risking a broken leg, or worse. The place was in an industrial park a good way from any major road, but she decided to stay there and keep watch in case she could raise the attention of anyone passing by. She was wearing a bright yellow roll-neck sweater which she would take off and use to wave if needed. Until then she very much needed it herself in the unheated and now draughty room.

It was several hours later and becoming dark when at last she saw a car approaching. There had been no other contact, and no noises or voices had reached her eerie cell. As the car drew nearer she suddenly had an idea. She rushed over to the light switch. It worked! Pulling off the sweater, she switched the light on and off rapidly for a half-minute before leaving it on, leaning out of the window, shrieking for help and waving the sweater violently.

The car seemed to slow down, its tail brake-lights glowing. Someone in the back wound down a window and called something out to her. What, she could not make out.

'Help me! Please help me!' she screamed, waving furiously.

The car now turned into the gate. Someone *had* seen her. They were coming to help! 'Here! Here! Help me!' she continued, her voice becoming hoarse. She could see now that there were three people in the car.

The man now had a clear view of her and shouted again. This time she could hear what he said. 'Nice little tits you got there! Can't wait to see the rest!' There was laughter from inside the car. Then she saw the man who had met her at the airport come out and open the gate for them.

Slamming the window closed, she turned off the light and put the sweater back on, dragging her topcoat around her like a comfort blanket. Then she sat on the floor in the corner furthest from the door and hugged her knees, rocking herself as the panic began to rise in her. She tried to lose herself in her Mahayanan Buddhism, the Greater Vehicle, calling now on its gentle gods like Amida the Redeemer. The four truths – what were they? She repeated them

over and over like a mantra. Life is pain. Pain comes from desire and attachment. Ceasing desire releases pain. Detachment is by the Middle Way between pleasure and abstinence . . .

But it did nothing to help. She could not meditate now. Whatever it was they were going to do to her, it was about to start.

Sure enough, in less than five minutes she heard heavy footsteps and the corridor light came on, casting a glow around the door. Keys jangled again and her kidnapper came in, threw the light switch and took her roughly by the arm. 'What kind of man are you?' she pleaded with him. 'Don't *do* this. Please help me!'

He did not even slow down, half dragging her to the stairs down to the floor below. At the end of the corridor she could see bright studio lights blazing, and the sound of men joking in Spanish. He pushed her in to the room and she fell at the feet of one of the three men in there. They had connected up professional-looking lighting, sound and camera equipment and seemed ready to roll. Barely able to breathe through fear, she managed to look around. There was no bed, no props other than a chair in front of the camera.

'Don't worry,' the elder of the men said in a heavy Spanish accent. 'This is just the trailer.' The other men laughed loudly again, and Fuji was picked up and dumped on the wooden chair.

17

Sool was dining alone in his suite at the Manila Hotel. He was tired, having arrived from Seoul in the Gulfstream at Ninoy Aquino, the Philippines' international airport, just three hours earlier. SGT owned an electrical assembly business two hours north, outside Subic Bay, Zambales, and he had agreed some time ago to attend their board meeting the next day. He would fly up to the new Clark Field Airport in the morning, wanting a night on his own first, to avoid the mind-numbing hospitality they would have felt obliged to give him if he had flown direct. It was important to carry on his business life as normally as possible, to avoid raising any suspicions before the big Chinese announcement. For someone with a reputation for eccentricity, however, acting normally was something of a challenge. If he became a corporate poodle again, that itself would be remarked upon and lead to gossip

The Sat-phone rang in the bedroom, and he hurried to answer it. Miss Wilkins had not rung him when she had promised, and he was anxious to keep a dialogue open with her, in case the worm problem really did become as serious as she was threatening. The

latest reports from the UK were worrying him. Mann, concerned about subsequent legal action, had wanted to go public and warn other network users of the threat. Sool, however, had categorically refused to let Chiasmus do this, knowing that it could panic the Chinese, with the signing ceremony now just five days away.

'Chairman. Excuse me please. This is Park Chang-Hyun. Excuse me.'

Sool was disappointed. 'What do you want?' he barked.

'Chairman. Sorry. I regret that I telephone and disturb you.' His voice was even more nervous than normal, his *nunchi* antenna trying to sniff his superior's mood He had potentially bad news for his chairman, and was anxious to ensure that Sool would suffer no loss of face with him, and also that his feelings and mood, his *kibun*, would not be damaged. Westerners working in Korea have called this the 'Friday Afternoon Syndrome', whereby junior staff routinely hold bad news back from their boss until late Friday afternoon so as not to upset his *kibun*.

Sool was too long in the tooth, too cosmopolitan, not to notice Park's transparent attempt to preserve some kind of harmony, and to shield him. 'You have called with a reason. You are a good man. I trust your judgment. Tell me.'

Relieved, Park used the phrases he had been rehearsing. 'Chairman. It is about the safe. In the Trump Tower apartment. You told me I was the only other person to know the combination, in case you urgently needed something from it whilst you were travelling. A very great honour. Well, Chairman, I was asked by Miss Field today if I would give her the combination. She said she had been loaned some very expensive diamonds and jewellery for a short period. For some modelling assignment she had agreed to, in support of a charity. She wants to leave them in the safe until she needs them.'

Sool knew his man, but asked anyway. 'And what did you do?'

'I said I had to ask your permission, of course, Chairman. Was I correct to disturb you with this, please?'

'You did the right thing. What did Miss Field say when you told her this?'

'She looked concerned, Chairman. Very sorry. She then said I was to forget it, and definitely not to disturb you with the request. She could leave the jewels with the owner and have them delivered by security guard to the studio. It would make no difference, she said.'

Sool thought for a while, leaving Park on hold. At last he asked, 'The security system is working well?' Just over the safe, he had installed a fibre-optic 'camera' which, at half the diameter of a human hair, was virtually impossible to detect. It was programmed to photograph anyone punching the combination pad, and then transmit the image instantaneously to a remote processor at the security firm who fitted the system. The company had been briefed to telephone Sool or Park any time, any place, as soon as an image of someone other than one of the two of them was received.

'Yes, Chairman. I will telephone and triple-check with the company right away.'

'Good. You did the right thing. Good.' He hung up and snapped the case shut sourly. It seemed barely credible that Jane of all people could be trying to steal something, or be working to betray him. A copy of his mother's letter was in that safe, along with the masters of all the snuff videos. There were details of the Japanese officers on his hit list, and private detective agency reports on young female members of their families. There were also records of his massive payments to Arnold Beeker, the mobster Park had found – again through the detective agency. He had worked on the basis that his state-of-the-art safe, in one of the best protected buildings in a country where the constitution protected inalienable civil liberties, was as secure from thieves and probing official eyes as it would be anywhere in the world. Now he was not so confident. With the Hong Kong announcement imminent, he had to make sure that nothing could possibly go wrong. Not now. He would have to pay Jane Field a surprise visit.

Picking up the house phone, he called the concierge. 'Get my pilot. I want to leave for New York. Within the hour.'

The Joint Intelligence Committee had been in session for over an hour before calling Mitchell in. Such was the sophistication of modern surveillance techniques that the Cabinet Office secure cell, in Room 130, was lead-lined and suspended in air to all but cancel out the risk of bugging. Most such cells – common in embassies – are windowless interior rooms, but this first-floor office overlooked Whitehall. To compensate, its windows were coated with a special type of silver foil, down which white noise cascaded to frustrate any attempt to pick up vibrations in the panes.

Mitchell nodded to the men in the room, and the solitary woman

from GCHQ, then took a seat. His own chief was ill again with bronchitis, and the SIS was represented by his number two, a sound if cautious man. 'With your agreement, Chairman, I'll ask Perry Mitchell to summarise the situation on the Korean. Then we can ask the DTI and FCO to comment on the trade and diplomatic side of things,' he said.

'We can all read, I'm sure,' the JIC chairman said acidly. '*Is* there anything you want to add to your report, Mitchell?' The meeting had progressed slowly and he had a mountain of things to get through before the end of play.

'A little. About the problems at Chiasmus. Plus some new intelligence from Japan. And I could summarise the key decision points in a very few sentences, if that would help.'

'Very well. But do let's get on.'

'You will have seen from my sit-rep that we're facing a difficult situation. On a lot of fronts. It comes down to this. Sool is intent on a series of acts of economic sabotage against Japan. In a few days' time he will announce the Chinese people's car contract snatched from under Kuruma's nose. The Governor of the Bank of England agrees with Sool's own likely scenario. The yen and Nikkei will dive. This car deal is widely acknowledged as showing how the Chinese leadership is moving. Everyone has assumed a continuation of a special relationship between China and Japan. China is Japan's second-largest trading partner, and Japan China's largest, with two-way trade worth over $50 billion. Direct inward investment to China is approaching $2 billion, with as much again in the pipeline.'

'And they also receive huge amounts in soft loans – 1,500 billion yen since 1979, and another 580 million earmarked to the end of the century,' the DTI man cut in, feeling he had to say something to stake out his territory.

Mitchell glowered at him, detesting what he called the committee commandos, pen-pushers for whom a reference in the minutes was like being mentioned in dispatches. 'Compare this with China's booming traffic with South Korea. Two-way trade is already running at approaching $20 billion, with inward investment annually of over $600 million. There are no illusions in Japan. Korea is the great pretender to their special China relationship, on which so much of their future trade depends. Take that away and the mighty, invincible Japan plc suddenly looks a high-cost, highly vulnerable

little country. And it could get much worse for them. Just imagine the view from Tokyo if China next used its influence on North Korea to reunite the peninsula . . .'

'How important really is this car deal?' asked the chairman.

'It's big in itself. They're talking about an initial investment of $1.5 billion, to produce 150,000 passenger cars a year. But as I said, it's the signal it will send more widely that counts. It will be interpreted – this is what the Governor confirmed to me – as Beijing seeing its future with "tiger cub" states like Korea, Singapore, Malaysia and the Philippines. Countries the Chinese feel they can still dominate. Unlike traditional superpowers like the USA and Japan, who they fear will swamp them. Economically and culturally. As they see happening in Russia.' Mitchell paused to see if he was holding the chairman's legendary brief attention span.

'Go on. This is more significant than I had appreciated. You say this announcement about Sool winning the Chinese contract will be issued in a few days,' the man said. 'If so, where do British interests lie?'

'There's the tail end of our Hong Kong involvement, of course. Some lingering responsibilities since 30 June. But that's not central. The main impact will be the instability in world markets, and the likely protectionist response from Tokyo. The Governor fears the Japanese, if really wounded, might pull out of GATT Uruguay Round agreements on open trade, and disrupt APEC, the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation group, which is targeted to become the world's largest free trade zone by 2020. Japan could very easily revert back to the kind of isolationist tendencies it had before – even to something like what she displayed before the Meiji restoration back in 1867.'

'And there's the American intelligence on the murders,' Mitchell's deputy chief prodded, impressed with his man's obvious if somewhat showy grasp of the brief.

'Yes. As I outline in the sit-rep, the FBI have very strong grounds for linking Sool to a series of murders. Of young Japanese nationals.'

'And what does the Japanese government say about all this?' It was the Foreign and Commonwealth Office representative.

'Nothing. They've been unusually quiet about it. But I asked our station in Tokyo to fish around with his contacts at the Intelligence Headquarters, Japan's secret service. The report came in overnight.

It seems that even though they have made no official comment, they are very active through police and diplomatic channels, investigating common factors between the incidents. We've learned that all the girls came from wealthy families. And all had a direct link through their grandfathers, or some other close relation, to Japanese officers in the war – each stationed for a time at the same base in China. Near Shanghai. At least one of the old men had been sent a copy of a video showing the sexual abuse and murder of his granddaughter. We know because the story made a local newspaper after the man committed ritual suicide. *Seppuku*. By *hara-kiri*. But soon after, the story was denied. It was claimed the man had simply been depressed. The authorities quickly put a block on any publicity about the deaths, and the tape 'disappeared'.'

'I don't see the connection between all this and the car deal,' the chairman cut in.

'The connection is Sool. The connection is virulent anti-Japanese sentiment. And revenge. There's also the third strand. Our intelligence from Moscow about Sool hiring some kind of *boyevaya*, a terrorist or murder squad. The man has become seriously unstable and dangerous Something happened to break him a couple of years ago. We don't yet know what it was, but the results are plain to see. Someone is going to have to stop him. Sooner rather than later.'

'So all you say hangs on the man's state of mind. You say he's unstable. What real evidence do you have of that? You don't continue to run a successful global business like SGT if you're barking mad,' the chairman snapped.

Mitchell looked wearily at his deputy chief and pressed on. 'We gave a dossier on Sool – including information from the Americans – to our service psychiatrist at Moorhead Hall. An expert in profiling. His belief is that Sool may be psychotic, displaying typical symptoms – believing himself the subject of plots, hatred and ridicule He's mistrustful, jealous, moody and prone to sudden acts of violence. He's also well known for hitting people in his company. Even directors in board meetings. And it's reported that he's occasionally been violent with his mistress. The American model, Jane Field His psychosis may by now have developed into paranoid schizophrenia.'

'What do you make of the problems at Chiasmus Communications?' It was the man from the Department of Trade and Industry again – a young high-flier, clearly tickled pink to have

been invited to represent his department at his first ever JIC.

'Sool has fired hundreds of people in the last year or so. My guess is that one or more of them have decided to get their revenge. They've hit Chiasmus, and SGT, where it hurts most. The managing director of Chiasmus, a David Mann, finally called in the Met this morning. He's in a blind panic, and worried for his own skin. Lawsuits for negligence As you've read in my report, there's a highly sophisticated virus of some kind or another at loose in Chiasmus's global network. Computers are crashing everywhere. Apparently Sool is refusing to let him call in external help, or to warn other companies. But he's done so without his knowledge. It's still not publicly known that Chiasmus is the source of this thing.'

'Just how serious is it?' The DTI had been fielding press calls all day about some mysterious new killer computer bug.

Mitchell paused before replying, trying to find a layman's parallel for the technical briefing his people had given him before he left. 'It's a lot like a forest fire. Started small, went unattended – and as of now is completely out of control. None of the anti-virus programs are having any effect. So far.'

The chairman decided it was time to haul back the discussion. 'What a bloody mess,' he said with feeling. 'So, Mitchell, what is it you want?'

'We need to decide now, or in the next few hours, with ministerial agreement, what – if anything – we are going to do. We can leak the China car news, and try and scupper the deal by embarrassing Beijing.'

'Absolutely out of the question. If we do that SGT and Chiasmus go belly up on the derivative options. And with that go thousands of British and EU jobs. Along with all the grants we've given them.' Inevitably it was the DTI speaking.

'I disagree.' It was the FCO. 'We cannot possibly be party to such an economic attack on a leading G7 partner. It would all come out in the end. Bound to. And what then of our diplomatic and indeed trading relations with Japan? Britain standing idly by, knowing all about this extraordinary act of aggression? Absolutely not. Unconscionable.'

'So. We have the Foreign Office and Trade Ministry at loggerheads yet again. Any other suggestions, Mitchell?' There was heavy sarcasm in the chairman's voice.

'We or the Americans arrest Sool. For involvement in the murders if the federal attorneys have enough evidence, or for some trading irregularities we can dream up. It would only have to stick for a week. Take him out of circulation and give the Chinese the chance to call things off quietly themselves. Then it's their decision. No loss of face.'

'Korean presidents and *chaebol* leaders in the dock have hardly been a rare sighting recently,' cut in the DTI. 'And it seems to have done precious little harm to their trading performance. Or their ability to execute existing contracts and projects.' Paradoxically, Sool and SGT had escaped the *chaebol* bribery scandal because he had lost earlier presidential patronage owing to his maverick behaviour. Frozen out, he had already ceased to be one of the favoured few receiving state contracts and subsidised loans.

'I agree. Corporate governance doesn't seem to travel east very well,' Mitchell replied, to some quiet laughter. He brought a stop to this when he added, 'The *chaebol* seem able to carry on without their leaders Which is why the Americans also reject TWEP.'

The DTI man leaned over to the SIS deputy chief and asked in a whisper what he meant.

The chairman noticed. 'He means termination with extreme prejudice. What our friends in the KGB used to call *mokrie dela*. Wet affairs Understand now, young man?' he said unnecessarily cruelly. 'And that, Mitchell, amounts to what our *American* friends would call Strike Two Does it not? Your ideas so far don't seem to do the trick. Could I press you, ever so gently, on where we might go next?'

'You may, Chairman,' Mitchell replied, undaunted. 'There is an obvious clash between the interests of two powerful departments. It's over to you now. The Cabinet Office has to resolve it. Quickly. With the Prime Minister if necessary Along, I suggest, with advice from the Governor – given the imminent disruption of financial markets. And on that point, I'm sure I needn't remind all of you that we are now insiders, and must under no circumstances trade.' He fixed the chairman with a stern eye, and noticed him squirm slightly. The man was a product of several generations whose private wealth had been built on old-boy insider trading, only recently made illegal. 'Overall, however, the unpalatable truth is that neither we nor the Americans can do anything much to stop Sool that might not damage us more. We're

impotent in this matter. Economically, politically, diplomatically and militarily.'

The meeting was stunned and not a little appalled by this frank admission. 'Anyone demur?' the chairman asked, wanting to get on, and beginning to find Mitchell irritating. 'No? Very well. I'll report to our masters accordingly and press for an early decision. But do what you can to avert this terrorist threat, won't you? And to kill off this computer virus thing. It won't be doing our image abroad any good if it ever becomes known the bloody thing originated here. Will it?'

'No, sir,' Mitchell replied, with just a touch too much emphasis on 'sir' for everyone but the chairman not to notice.

As they walked down to their car, parked on Horse Guards, Mitchell's deputy chief asked, 'Is that what you really think? Leave it to the politicians?'

'No. We have to stop this Chinese deal, without showing our hand. But as we've just seen, the practical politics of it all are impossible given the jobs and grants arguments. In the end the PM will support the DTI and overrule the FCO on this one. We have to intervene. Covertly.'

'I happen to be with the Foreign Secretary tonight. Should I tell him, do you think?'

'No. I don't think you should. He's not yet house-trained. Best he knows nothing.'

'You're probably right. But you say that we and the Americans are in any case pretty well impotent. So if we can't stop Sool, who can?'

Mitchell smiled. 'I've got a good man on the inside. John Blake He's a businessman. Press-ganged. But I've just learned about someone who might be our secret weapon. Someone who might be able to do what the combined might of Britain and the USA can't. And who is already a whisker away from bringing Sool and his empire crashing to its knees.'

'Who? Our man in Seoul?'

'No. Our woman in Islington,' Mitchell chuckled. 'A formidable old battle axe. Someone Sool sacked recently. That's who. Trust me.'

Another long flight alone.

Blake settled into the club-class window seat on the British

Airways 747, slightly annoyed with himself for trying, and then failing, to get an upgrade to first. Tacky. He generally chose a window seat on long-haul flights, having read somewhere that hijackers tended to pick on passengers in convenient aisle seats. Hong Kong is eight hours ahead of GMT and his eleven-hour morning flight would get him there the next day by late afternoon. He had a lot of paperwork to get through, but could not bring himself to tackle it. His briefcase would for once stay safely stowed in the locker above. He simply was not in the mood.

Flying out to begin a high-profile assignment, like the China announcement, always gave him a bitter sweet taste of excitement and terror. The beginning, the preparation, was like the start of a steeplechase. There were plenty of manageable fences to negotiate, but all the time you knew that a Beechers Brook was looming around a bend, waiting to send you tumbling. You either got over it, or you did not. Simple as that. Nowhere to hide, and you had just one shot at it Add to this Mitchell and the security service business, and Blake feared the worst. The thing was getting messy, and too much was beyond his control. Sool, who still seemed reluctant to study a brief, or be media-trained; the Chinese, playing central-casting-inscrutable; Mitchell, drawing him into heaven knows what, telling him only fragments of what was really going on; and Jane. Jane, Jane, Jane . . .

Soon after take off they served dinner, and he downed enough champagne, wine and Scotch to ensure a good alcohol-induced sleep a little later. The businessman next to him was, mercifully, monosyllabic and remained glued to his lap-top for much of the flight after the meal, tapping away irritatingly. He was fiddling with a business plan, which Blake could view as easily as his personal in flight video screen. The company was in dietary supplements and had no secrets from Blake by the time he was ready to snooze, leaving him appalled – not for the first time – by how lax and naïve business travellers tended to be about their neighbours on planes and trains. Perhaps he would make a good spy after all, he thought, as, tiring of yet another *Mr Bean* repeat, he pulled on his eyeshades, pushed in his earplugs and reclined his seat.

He awoke later dehydrated, clambered awkwardly over the sleeping multi-vitamin king, freshened up in the toilet and found a glass of water. His mild hangover tied another billy can to his rucksack of guilt, so he went back to his seat, took down his

briefcase and worked solidly for four hours after all. The press conference and official signing ceremony were going to be held at the Mandarin Oriental, and the artwork for the banners and signs had all been agreed. There would be theatre-style seating for around sixty journalists in the first-floor Pheasant's Room, with a top table at the far end. Blake had used the room before, and knew it was not ideal for his needs. It was long and narrow, wood-panelled and, with its green carpets, altogether too dark and dreary. It had been the best his Hong Kong Globecom people had been able to book at short notice, however. And even though the room was not one of his favourites, he at least knew that the staff and service would be excellent.

Blake had decided on three o'clock as timing. Late by normal standards, but this was no normal brief He had to use the announcement to do as much harm as he could to Japan. Tokyo is an hour ahead of Hong Kong, and the news would arrive just in time to panic the stock market before it closed The event itself was to be a carefully staged programme of set speeches from the Chinese and Chairman Sool Each wearing a red buttonhole flower, they would with great formality sign and exchange copies of the agreement, with crossed flags of the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Korea on the table in front of them. This would be the main-picture story for the broadcast media and press. The confined area presented Blake with his biggest logistical problem. He had been toying with staging a second signing in an adjacent room a few minutes later for the half-dozen TV crews he expected, but so far the Chinese – inflexible as ever – had vetoed the idea.

The wording of the press release and backgrounder had at last been approved. It was all still far too long and flowery for his taste, but at least he had managed to keep it manageably pithy – by Asian standards – by reassuring them that the full text of both speeches was to be included in the press packs. The one thing missing had been stock photographs of the two men. Sool had refused to agree to this As open questions would not be taken, many local journalists and stringers would not bother attending. They would either pick up the pack and leave, or expect Globecom to bike a copy direct to them early, suitably embargoed. That was why a stock picture would have been useful to them, and Sool's extreme reaction to the routine request had worried Blake, showing once again his unpredictability.

He had forgone 'breakfast', and stowed his briefcase under the seat in front as at long last the pilot announced their descent into what had always been one of Blake's favourite cities. Just how much and how quickly the Chinese would change things, it was too early to say. Below him now the finishing touches were being made to the towering new headquarters of China's Foreign Affairs Ministry on its hilltop, symbolically overlooking the city centre. Already Hong Kong had been designated a Chinese SAR – a Special Administrative Region, a title that made it sound anything but special. They had as threatened also dismantled the elected legislature, a legacy of the British handover, and replaced it with 150 appointed members. Some were Hong Kong people, including many 'official advisers'. These were the business and other professional leaders who railed against the attempts by Chris Patten, the last British Governor, now replaced by a Beijing-appointed chief executive, to leave in place a democratic framework. But that legacy of the 1984 Joint Declaration, that promissory flying pig, had evaporated when the Red First Regiment had marched in that summer to raise the Chinese flag.

Blake was pleased that the opening of the new airport at Chek Lap Kok had been delayed to the following spring, because it gave him what might be his last chance to land at Kowloon's famous and exciting Kai Tak. The veteran of a score of visits, he now saw beneath him his own personal landmarks to the approach – the peculiar, magical islands, exotic stumps in the South China Sea, the suspension bridges, the pyramids in the rock-face, and dazzling white buildings shooting like stalagmites from the green, forest-carpeted hills, and the red and white chequers of Lion Rock. There was also the discomforting sight of a graveyard on one of the hills leading to the death-wish airport so disliked by pilots.

With the rude suddenness of all long journeys, it was finally over, and first, club and back-of-bus passengers were made briefly classless, as they queued at the pedantic Chinese immigration control. Next they found and jostled their baggage through customs and returned to the more familiar world of the 'haves' and 'have-nots'. Blake had decided against staying at the Mandarin, across the harbour, and had instead booked a small suite at one of his favourite hotels in the world – the Peninsula. This was also where Sool was to stay. And of course Jane. He had pre-ordered a hotel car, and as he made his way down to the chauffeur collection point he saw the gleaming green Rolls-Royce limousine approach.

The ten-minute journey, his last moments of immunity from the circus of the next few gut wrenching days, was over far too quickly, and he got out of the peaceful, air-conditioned car and stepped briefly into the noisy, 85 per cent humidity of Salisbury Road. Striding through the busy lobby, he went directly across to the desk to check in, and asked for any messages.

There were two from his office – with more doubtless on his personal fax in the suite – and one to contact Jane Glancing at the GMT hand of his Rolex, he subtracted five hours to check the time in New York. Too early. He would leave it a couple of hours, unsure of where exactly Sool might be. The Korean was supposed to be in the Philippines, but one of his London office faxes said he had not shown up. He just might be in New York. Then it hit his still jet lagged mind. He was now facing a world press briefing called for three days' time, with Sool, his main man, missing.

The circus had certainly begun.

18

'Have you watched this thing?' Trent demanded, his voice strained.

'No. It was delivered this morning. Anonymous. To the hospital desk.' Pete Dandino knew what his friend was going through. A plain brown padded envelope, no note – just a videotape. He, like everyone else who had seen the Fort Worth tape, simply could not get it out of his mind. Now this. Now perhaps Fuji . . .

'Put it on.' There was an old video player with his hospital room TV.

'I think we should talk about it first. I mean . . . You're still sick. Bombed out. Maybe I should have it looked at back at headquarters. Have it checked for prints, get forensic on to the casing and bag.'

'Pete! I'm going crazy here! Put the thing on, for pity's sake.'

Dandino nodded sadly, took out the tape, holding it carefully by the edges, and put it in the machine. 'Pray to God,' he said, crossing himself, his back to Trent, before sitting on the bed alongside him.

The lead-in footage was painfully, unbearably long, before the screen at last came to life with a close-up of Fuji's face. She was

obviously terrified, and kept looking away from the camera at someone or something to her right.

'Richard, I'm here to tell you that I'm OK. They've treated me OK. And I'm to show you this, today's newspaper. They haven't harmed me.' She looked away again, obviously reading from something being held up to her. 'But they need you to call off your personal thing about the Japanese tapes. There will be no more of them. The contract is finished. You can't change anything now. You can't stop them doing more, because it's over already. Without you. All over, that is, if you stop your vendetta, your fixation about all of this. Because if not . .' Her brave, small voice so far had been controlled, but she was now sobbing. 'Because if not . . . they say they'll make just one more Specially for you . . . They accept you can't call off the official FBI and police investigations. But they know it's you, you personally, who has nosed around, and made this thing your life's work. They want you to get off their case. And now. They'll release me when they're convinced you've backed off, for good. These people have someone in LAPD, someone on the take. So they'll know what's happening That's it. That's all there is.

'And Richard, this is from me now. I love you. We'll be together again. Like in *Tosca Just* like Palmieri You understand? Do what you need to . . ' Then the image had vanished, leaving the TV hissing and spitting at them.

Her last few words had obviously not been scripted and Trent buried his head in his hands to hide the tears. Dandino offered an arm and then withdrew it, sensing that Trent was uncomfortable with touch. 'Let it out, buddie,' he said quietly. 'Let it out.'

'Where are you on Arnold Beeker?' Trent demanded, angrily getting a grip on himself. 'It has to be his people holding her.'

We've had him in, but there's no hard evidence of anything. The link with the warehouse is something, and we're working on it. But all we have is one of his company names on a short lease, and a contract with a legit security monitoring agency. His lawyers are laughing at us. The best in town. Whatever we have is going to be slow.'

'Then my people have to move on Sool. Now! It's the only answer.'

Dandino shook his head. 'No it isn't As a pal, I say the only answer is to do what they say, and back off. Due process is way too slow. Get off the case. Go home and pick up on other things with the

Bureau. I'll make it known that's what's going down so their man gets to hear real quick. I can go back and put the word out right away. We'll say that as soon as you're released from hospital, you're leaving and on to some new assignment. What about it?'

Trent looked at him with dead eyes. 'Sure. Why not? It's worth a shot. Put the word out. Do it. Sure. And thanks.'

When Dandino had left, taking the tape and envelope with him for tests, Trent called his SAC chief in New York. It was three hours earlier there and he had only just arrived at his office, clutching his usual breakfast from the McDonald's directly opposite on Broadway.

'How goes it? Anything developed overnight?' he asked, taking out the pungent Egg McMuffin and biting into it hungrily. Living alone across the East River in Brooklyn, he never seemed to have time for more than a swig of juice before setting off on the bumper-to-bumper drive over the bridge.

Trent quickly brought him up to date with news of the tape. 'The bottom line is that you have to move on Sool. We can't make anything hold quick enough on Beeker. Not in time to help Fuji. That only leaves the Korean. How about it?'

'I had our attorneys look over all this just yesterday. And we still don't have a chance. We got into his safe yesterday at Trump Tower. Jane Field is co-operating fully now. But nothing. I mean *nothing*. The thing was . . . had been emptied. Pal, I want to help. Hell, we all do, but we still have nothing even near indictable.'

'Where is he now?'

'He's flying into New York later this morning, according to flight plans from the Philippines. But we know he and Field will have to leave almost immediately for Hong Kong. He'll be at a major press conference there Friday. About some big Chinese trade deal, according to London.' The Governor of the Bank of England had made it clear to the SIS that he saw no advantage – in fact quite the reverse – in the Americans or anyone else knowing about the car deal and the expected collapse of the yen. If the Federal Reserve or other central banks were informed, then 'the British interest could hardly prevail'. Instead the Old Lady would be ruthlessly unloading yen and adjusting its positions.

'Thanks. I know you tried.' Trent was bitterly disappointed about

the safe, having been sure it would give them some hard evidence. Once again, however, Sool and his people had been a step ahead of them. It was all looking hopeless.

'What do you plan to do? I agree with what you say Dandino just told you. Come back east. I'll assign you to something high profile and make sure it's widely known. It's our best shot at getting Fuji out of there.'

'Sure. You set it up. I'll play ball as soon as they let me out of here,' Trent answered, and hung up.

If only it were that simple. But neither his SAC, Dandino or Beeker's men knew Fuji like he did. Any more than they knew their opera In her last few sentences, Fuji had sent him a grim coded message. 'We'll be together again. Like in *Tosca* *Just* like Palmieri. You understand? . . .'

Trent understood only too well. Puccini's *Tosca* was their favourite opera, becoming hooked on it through the 1992 Domingo outdoor performance, broadcast 'live' from Rome over three days. They had bought the subtitled video, watched it many times, and had also seen the opera twice since at the Met. Fuji's reference to Palmieri therefore had rendered him cold with fear. In the opera, the evil chief of police Scarpia is trying to seduce Tosca by promising to spare her lover, Cavaradossi, from execution. The firing squad would use blanks, Cavaradossi would be told to fall convincingly, and they would later be free. Except that Scarpia gives his agent the coded message that the execution is to be 'as we did in the case of Palmieri. You understand?' In fact, they had tricked Palmieri and conducted a real, not a mock, execution.

Fuji's message was crystal clear Whatever they promised him, whatever he did, her belief was that they would kill her regardless. If the Bureau could not or would not act on Sool, and the LAPD had nothing on his murderous agent Beeker, then there was only one option left.

Trent found a travel agency in the directory and booked a ticket for an early evening flight to Hong Kong. Then he dressed, packed his bag and slipped out of the busy hospital without discharging himself. His plan was crude and simple. Sool would probably be difficult to get to, especially given his own still-painful injuries. But Jane Field? That should be easy It would be a straight swap. His wife for the Korean's whore.

• • •

'Hello, you. I got your message. Everything OK? You're still coming?' Blake was calling her before meeting some of his Hong Kong team for dinner.

She was pleased he had rung. The last few days had been hell for her. 'Hi! You in Hong Kong now?'

'Got in a couple of hours ago. Didn't want to disturb your beauty sleep. And talking of beauty, where's the beast? I hear he never showed up for some meeting in the Philippines.'

'The federal people have warned me he's on his way back here. Due to land late morning. But he's not been in touch with me himself. It's all very odd. I'm kind of afraid. He must somehow have found out about me trying to help the police.' Her tremulous voice revealed her worry.

'Did they get into the apartment safe?'

'That's what's scaring me. Yes, they sent a couple of guys over yesterday evening and they finally opened the thing. But it was empty Completely empty. I later found out from the maid that Park had been in the apartment the day before, just after I'd left for a lunch. He'd told her to keep out of the lounge and work in the bedrooms while he was there. Then he left carrying a small valise. That's no coincidence. He must have been told by K-S to empty the safe. And that definitely means he knows. I'd asked Park earlier for the combination, saying I wanted to deposit some jewellery. It's obvious what happened. He immediately reported it to him, and now K-S thinks he'll surprise me by showing up for some kind of confrontation. I don't know what to do. Get the hell out, or stay and face him.'

Once more Blake felt himself confronting the usual moral dilemma. Nothing could be allowed to spook Sool or jeopardise the press conference. Mitchell had confirmed that the British would not be acting to block the man, for reasons, he had said, of domestic practical politics, and diplomatic concern over Anglo-Sino relations. And yet he knew that the price just might be Jane's safety. 'What did the FBI people say?'

'That he's not likely to be a direct threat to me. They figure K-S doesn't like to get his own hands dirty. But they're keeping him under round-the-clock surveillance over here, and they say the British will do the same in Hong Kong. If he still wants me seen with him in public, then that sounds a lot safer than me disappearing from sight just now.'

'And that's what you think?'

'I guess,' she replied unsurely. 'Slapping me around and getting off on it is one thing. But I agree that if it *is* him behind the murder tapes, then there's no way he'd have had the guts to have done anything that violent with his own manicured little hands. The FBI man gave me a kind of panic button transmitter, in a battery wristwatch. A Swatch They can track me with it, direction finding, DF-ing, they called it. If I hit the button they come running. So, yeah, I figure I can tough it out as far as Hong Kong If this thing out there really *is* so damned important. But then I'm gone. Period.'

'That all sounds like the best thing. And I'll be with you on Wednesday evening, at a cocktail party And we'll grab some time together on Thursday. Things at my end should be running on autopilot by then, so I ought to be able to get away for a few hours. You try and block out Thursday lunch and afternoon. Say you're going shopping with one of my Globecom women as a guide. Sound possible?'

'Sure I'd like that,' she said, feeling a little better for having at least talked to someone about things.

'Better go. Good luck, love. Call me if you need me. See you soon.'

She hung up, musing over that curiously English use of the word 'love' as a kind of ubiquitous and ambiguous term of endearment. However it was meant, though, it sounded good to her. She felt a need for all the love and support she could get K-S would be along very soon, and she was not looking forward to seeing him one bit.

Miss Wilkins reread the piece in the *Financial Times* with detached amusement The EU Commissioner had announced an inquiry into SGT subsidiary Chiasmus Communications, in connection with the alleged pirating of super-chip semi-conductors. The news had been welcomed by leading computer manufacturers on both sides of the Atlantic. The article went on to catalogue the problems facing 'the ailing SGT', leading on to the ever-escalating vampire worm story, now beginning to be linked publicly to the corporation, along with the allegations of Mann's involvement with the insolvent laser sighting company, and now the intellectual copyright infringement. It said a statement on the worm's wider potential threat to businesses and other institutions worldwide would be made the next day by the

leader of an international task force set up to analyse and destroy the virus, a well-known Silicon Valley software millionaire who had based himself at SGT headquarters in Seoul, working with the company's own experts, fighting against time to save the corporation.

SGT's share price on the Seoul stock market had already dropped by 40 per cent since Chiasmus's name was linked to the disaster, and was continuing in free-fall. The suspension of trade in the shares pending clarification was now widely felt to be overdue, and expected at any time. The only thing that could save the company, and help the countless other innocent organisations now also infected, an FT editorial opined, was 'the immediate offer of help from the genius hackers who created the Helminth vampire worm, the most sophisticated unauthorised program ever encountered by the world's leading computer security experts. SGT and the task force should ask for it. Without delay.'

The electric kettle boiled, and she got up from the kitchen table to make herself a pot of tea. Miss Wilkins had not yet called Sool back, as promised, but intended to do so shortly. First she needed to clear her thoughts. Decide her strategy. Templeton had been round again and had also telephoned her many times, trying to find out where Richter had gone. He had, she knew, given details of her suspected involvement to the police, and a rather blustery Met detective constable and WPC had called on her and asked a lot of questions. The questions only served to reassure rather than frighten her, however. It was clear that they had no firm evidence linking her to the events at Chiasmus. No, if the 'genius hackers' were going to come to the rescue, it would be her decision with Richter, and not one forced on them by threats or police uniforms.

She had become deeply worried, however The sheer speed and scale of the havoc being wreaked by the worm had taken her by surprise. She had always treated Richter's boasts cautiously. But if anything, he had been too modest. He had, as promised, gone up to the hackers' conference in Glasgow and had called her several times. He was delirious with the success of his Helminth, and said it was all they were talking about in the sessions. Everyone was desperate to know who had created it, and he was finding it near impossible to keep quiet. He craved the recognition he deserved from all the swaggering computer nerds, groupies and boffins up there He needed Miss Wilkins to understand. If he told them he

would overnight become a global celebrity. As well known in his world as any rock star. There would be girls, really beautiful girls, throwing themselves at him. At him! But for her sake he had so far managed to gloat in silence.

What he had not warned her about, she had chided him, was the effect on non-commercial organisations. Hospitals, charities, aid agencies, utilities, the education system, emergency services and sensitive military installations. She should herself have recognised all this as being obvious, but somehow she had always thought that only SGT and other large commercial corporations would be hit.

The rasp of the entry-phone startled her, and she went to the hall to see who it was on the tiny video screen. She half expected it to be Templeton again. But it was a bald man, similar in age to herself, not someone she had ever seen before. 'Yes. Who is it?'

'Miss Wilkins? You don't know me, but I'd very much value a word with you. My name's Mitchell Peregrine Mitchell. May I come up?'

'What's it in connection with?'

'Oh, I think we both know that, don't we? To make it easy, let's say I'm here to see if you want to keep the cleaner Molly Spinks out of jail. How's that? Now can I come up?'

It was not the best of starts. Mitchell presented himself at her door wearing his tombstone smile, and she refused his outstretched hand. Without even offering to take his topcoat, she led him to the lounge and pointed to where he should sit. 'Are you another policeman? Or with Reg Templeton?'

'Oh, I might be, mightn't I? But no. On both counts. I work for the security services, Miss Wilkins. You can ring a real police officer at Scotland Yard if you want to check me out. I have his name here. Go ahead.'

It took a lot to frighten Miss Wilkins, but Mitchell was succeeding. 'Leave the name behind. I can check later if I need to. What exactly do you want?'

'Well, first off, I want to congratulate you! You and young Richter. You've done marvellously,' he chuckled, with what seemed sincere laughter. 'You must have had a whale of a time. Dressing up as cleaners! Marvellous! That's one of our little tricks, you know. It's amazing how people ignore you, and say things and leave things around as if you didn't exist.'

She could see that Mitchell was in an entirely different league to

Templeton and the police who had questioned her. Caution was called for. 'On behalf of whoever you think I am, or have done – thank you Now. Get to the point please. What do you want?'

He stood up and took off his overcoat, then settled down on the sofa, signalling that he expected to be there for a good while. 'In my funny old job, I often have to make very quick decisions on people. A bit like a customs officer, I often think. I see their files, of course, but more often than not it's all down to this . . .' He patted his stomach. 'Gut feel. And the cut of their gib. And I've had to do that with you. There's no real time left, you see. Anyway, I've decided to trust you. And I'm going to tell you pretty well all I know about your old boss Mr Sool, as well as some extremely sensitive governmental things. Official Secrets Act and all that.

'If at the end you prove me wrong, if you're not the highly intelligent, highly moral individual I think you are, if after all you're just a bitter, nasty old bat slipping into dementia, then I've made a *big* mistake, and we'd have to throw every conceivable book at you. But a cup of tea might oil the wheels first. What do you say?'

She knew she would need to confess to someone sooner or later. Mitchell was hardly priestly, but she sensed already that she could trust him. What she did not know was his agenda. Where all this was leading? For now she would play along, and listen. Things had reached the stage where doing nothing no longer seemed an option. 'Milk and sugar?'

'Thank you, no. But plain, ordinary Assam if you've got it.'

When she returned, Mitchell sipped noisily at the tea and, after a quick smile, started to explain. 'I meant what I said earlier, Miss Wilkins. I do admire what you've achieved. You struck back not just for yourself, but for all the others who have been downsized on to the human scrapheap. It may amuse you to know that exactly the same cost cutting mentality has taken over at the security services. Only they call it the peace dividend. I myself am weeks away from my slippers and cocoa. So believe me, what you've done has cheered a lot of us up. A bit like that vigilante, the real life Death Wish man in America who got his own back on the muggers. You and Richter, when this thing really gets out, will become folk heroes.'

'I feel a "but" coming on,' she cut in.

'But – and you're right, there is a very important "but" – there are things about Sool you could not possibly know. Things that

have a great bearing on what you must do next. The man is far more dangerous and evil than even you think. He would have you killed with absolutely no compunction. As he has already had many others killed.'

'No Surely!' Miss Wilkins was deeply sceptical. The man was eccentric and ruthless. But he was just a businessman, and she could not believe that he was some kind of crazed killer.

He told her about the snuff tapes and the FBI's complete conviction regarding Sool's involvement. 'Democracies can be inconvenient at times like this,' he went on. 'There is absolutely no reasonable doubt that Sool has caused all these terrible deaths. But no one has yet come up with a credible motive. And so far there is nothing like enough evidence. No hope of such a high-profile and diplomatically important case coming to court just yet, then. It would cause a sensation. Almost of O.J. Simpson dimensions. But still the terror goes on. Now the Japanese-American wife of the federal special agent leading the investigations is being held somewhere. As a kind of blackmail. I also know that Sool has commissioned some other atrocity from a Moscow killer. What, I don't yet know.'

'If you want me to believe all this, you're going to have to do a better job. I know him as a ruthless corporate raider. But I've been with him at meetings, whilst minute taking. I simply don't find all this killings business credible. It doesn't fit with the man I know.' She almost told him about her Sat-phone relationship with Sool, but something stopped her.

Mitchell looked at her and shook his head. 'I have some pretty awful police photographs of the bodies of some of the young Japanese girls. Taken where they were found, dumped at road sides. Or, perhaps, if you have a video player . . .'

Afterwards Miss Wilkins felt numb Never in her darkest moments had she believed that mankind could be so evil. The war crimes, the actions of crazed or calculating serial killers, the Cambodian, the Rwandan, the Bosnian atrocities . . . All unspeakably horrific. And now she too had lifted a corner on this foul world and looked in. She went to make another pot of tea that neither of them really wanted. To do something with her hands, and vainly try to escape back to normality through the comfort of a familiar act. Of course, it did not work, and the bitter taste of the brew was emetic.

'And you say Sool paid for these things to happen?' she said at last.

'In police and intelligence terms, it's beyond reasonable doubt. That, I promise you, is the truth. And if you do all you can to help me, I'll do all I can for you.'

'I'm not really concerned about myself. But you threatened me with Mrs Spink on the entry-phone. I wouldn't want anything to happen to her. Or Gerhard Richter. It was me who drew him into all this. He's such a child at heart.'

'Like I said, I'd do all I can,' he promised.

'Very well. What do you want?'

'I want you and Richter to help kill off this worm thing. You have to contact him, and fly out to Seoul with him To work with the international task force and the SGT Electronics people. Do you know how to reach him?'

'Yes I can do that. But is it really necessary to fly out to Korea?'

'Vital. And tonight or tomorrow. As soon as possible.' Mitchell took in her slow, single nod of the head. 'Next I need your help to find out from Sool what's behind all this. What's driving him. If we can find his motives, then we'd be well on our way to collecting enough evidence to put him away. Something strange happened to him two years ago. A visit from his aunt Anyway, that's what people think. I need to know what she said to him.'

'And how on earth do you think I can help with that?'

Mitchell looked at her sharply 'You can ask him. On one of your little long-distance chats.'

She was shocked. How could they possibly know? Unless . . . 'Have you been tapping my phone?' she snapped.

'Not really yours. But his. GCHQ at Cheltenham routinely monitors all incoming and outgoing satellite voice communications, and cracked the commercial scrambler Sool uses. This is in addition to monitoring messages sent to and from any of our targets on the Internet. And from their end the Americans have been listening in to everything in or out from Sool, wherever he is. From their $2 billion E-Systems surveillance station at a place called Greenville, near Dallas. And all that money, all that manpower has recently been directed at little you. Including your call from the pay-phone in the Lanesborough.' He looked amused at her stunned expression. 'And yes. We can be that accurate.'

'In that case you will have heard Sool talk about some great personal tragedy in his life. I assume this message from his aunt is one and the same thing.'

'That's what we think. As he's raised the subject with you already, I thought you might try and probe more deeply. Try and get him to talk about it. Our service psychiatrist thinks it's well worth a try. Confessing things and sharing secrets with strangers is quite common, apparently. Will you try? First we'll get Richter and yourself booked on a flight to Korea. That's a priority. And then try and find out more from Sool, before you leave. We don't have much time. He will be heading for Hong Kong soon, for a very important press conference. His entire corporation is riding on it. We simply have to find out all we can. As soon as we can.'

'I'll try. You said you'd take a risk and trust me. Well, I'll do the same with you, Mr Mitchell.'

'I hoped you might,' he smiled. 'Your father would have been proud of you.' He had kept this up his sleeve in case he needed to use it to persuade her.

'My father? What has he got to do with this?'

'It's a very small world. I knew him. When I ran a check on you his details popped up, and I was as surprised as you clearly are. Wilkins is a common enough name, after all.'

'Exactly what did pop up? Please!'

'You obviously never knew, then. Nor, I think, did your mother.' Mitchell had quickly sensed the perhaps over-close relationship, the symbiosis between Emily Wilkins and her father. Between the single-minded, lonely spinster and the opaque, complex man he had known in the mid 1950s He would have to choose his words carefully. 'Professor Wilkins was our man at Oxford for a very long time. A wonderful recruiter for the security services. He was, still is, thought of extremely highly in the service '

Miss Wilkins was taken completely by surprise. She had always known that there was something secretive, something maddeningly oracular, about him. Something of Churchill's description of Russia – 'a puzzle wrapped in an enigma'. But this was not what she had expected, and she felt disappointed. Was that really why there were always so many interesting young students over at the house? Was it all really so cynical and calculated? A kind of intelligence service Tupperware party.

'He worked for your people for how long exactly?' she asked, trying to keep disgust out of her voice. The word spy had to her no glamorous connotations. Rather it was an insult, implying duplicity, slyness and prurience.

'Until he retired.'

'And his war. Mummy and I never really asked him, and he never spoke of it. But she always said to me that he came back changed. His nerves gone. Can you tell me about that?'

'He went on a number of missions behind enemy lines, as a member of Naval Intelligence, the NID. Working for the equally donnish Rear-Admiral John Godfrey. One was to try and capture a German cipher. From Belgium. He found himself trapped, and was caught and tortured by the Gestapo and Abwehr. Although – with help – he escaped, he had been put through more than you'd want to hear about. Also, in escaping he had to kill people. In close combat. He was awarded the DSM later, of course.'

Her arched eyebrows told him that Professor Wilkins had not even told his family about the medal. 'You say you think my father would have been proud of me. It seems you and your people knew him rather better than I did, so I'll have to take your word for that.'

'I've upset you. I'm sorry. That's the last thing I wanted. I just thought you'd already know, or would have guessed.'

She looked at him with a small smile. 'You were right to tell me. Really. It answers a lot of questions. And don't worry. It hasn't changed my mind about helping you. I'm as good as my word. You have another Wilkins on your books. I'll try and live up to the family reputation.'

Jane had decided to carry on with the day she had planned, despite her knowledge that Sool would return some time in the late morning. At all costs, she had to be seen to be acting normally.

The cab dropped her off at Gramercy Park South and she went into the National Arts Club to meet Clara. It would be the last time they would see each other for a while. Jane was off soon to Hong Kong, and Clara had a shoot in Morocco. The bar was on the west side of the clubhouse, leading into the members' dining room. Above it was one of the many stunning features of the building, the club's home since 1906 – the vaulted stained-glass dome, by the Bostonian artisan MacDonald. Although 'women of importance' had always been members, unusual for the nineteenth century, the

former home of Samuel Tilden remained relentlessly masculine – panelled, woody, leathery and immersed in high Victorian gloom. Because of this, Jane always dressed fairly soberly on her visits, and was today even wearing a masculine-cut charcoal suit, complete with shirt and loosely knotted tie. She was amused to see that Clara had also dressed appropriately – in a kind of Bohemian clutter of bits and pieces over a long print skirt. With her genius for clothes, however, it all worked perfectly in a Virginia Woolf, Bloomsbury Set way

'Hey! Mister! You sure you're not joining the sisterhood?' Clara called raucously as she came over to the long bar.

Jane blushed. More than a few models were bi, and she had found some comfort there herself when starting out. After long days, a long way from home, when every man had been a pig Clara knew this – although not from experience – and missed no opportunity to tease her about it. 'It takes someone real secure in their sexuality to cross-dress with confidence. And that's me. Miss Heterosexual 1997,' Jane replied, trying not to notice that the barman was listening.

'Yuk! Men. Horrible hairy aggressive things!' Clara by contrast looked directly at the barman as she spoke, settling on a barstool. 'What do you say, buddie? Huh? And give me a Campari soda. Stirred. Not two-tone. You know?'

'So when do you fly out to Africa?' Jane asked, to change the subject. She liked the club, and sometimes Clara could go too far.

Clara was examining her friend more carefully now. 'Saturday. And what's that shit watch? The gold leaf coming off your fake Rolex?'

'It's a present Kind of neat, I think.' The memory of the panic button brought her back to reality.

After a couple of Camparis for Clara, they went through to the dining room, each ordering soup, and then salads as a main course. Jane was about to bring her friend up to date on the Sool situation when their waiter came over and whispered to her that she had a guest in the hall asking to see her. As she went down the stairs her heart sank as she saw Park waiting. She noticed a fresh, livid red mark under his right eye. It would soon be a shiner. 'What is it? How did you know where to find me?'

He sucked breath noisily through his teeth, clearly ill at ease. That morning he had shown Sool the still pictures taken from the

fibre-optic just above the safe. The image of the two unidentified men, with Jane in the background, had sent Sool into one of his now almost daily blind rages. The blow had sent Park staggering backwards, over a coffee table, smashing a lamp. 'Sorry. Your maid. And Chairman Sool said it was urgent. Sorry.'

'Well?'

'He is in the car outside. You are to come with me to see him, please.'

Jane went to the door and looked through the half-glazing. Outside, framed in the club's pavement canopy, was a stretched limo. Its windows were black and so she could not see Sool. She could feel him in there, however, watching her.

It had to be done, so she took a deep breath and walked confidently to the car. Park opened the door for her, and she got in Sool was on the far side, sipping coffee. 'Jane. Come over here I leave you alone too often.' He held out his arms and she slid over and kissed him lightly.

Her mind was racing, trying to read the situation. 'When did you get back? I wasn't expecting you,' she said, breaking away.

'I had a sudden change of plan, and thought I'd surprise you. Like you've been surprising me.'

Surely there was an accusation in that last comment. 'How. How have I surprised you?'

'By how much I've missed you, of course. And now I've decided you're not to leave my side. We're a team. A good team, you and me. We need each other, don't we?'

'Yes. A great team,' she replied uncertainly.

With that, and with one of his childlike smiles, he called out something in Korean. Park got in beside the driver, and the car pulled away. 'But wait!' she protested 'What are you doing? My coat's back there. And I've got my lunch guest waiting for me.'

'You have many coats. And call your friend now. Here ' He handed her the phone. 'She'll understand.'

'Understand what?' Jane was now worried. Very worried.

'Just that you're on your way to Hong Kong. The plane is waiting for us We're going immediately.'

'But my things . . . I haven't packed. And my passport . . .'

'Your passport's right here. And I got the maid to pack a whole mountain of your favourite outfits. You can shop out there if you're not happy with what she chose. So relax. Enjoy. This is

how we should live. Sudden decisions. Whatever we like. The fast lane. Yes?'

He was still holding her hand, and she drew it sharply away from him. 'No. No! It's not as simple as that. I've got a life. And your idea of "how we should live" is no more than how *you* want to live. You didn't ask me. You didn't even consider me '

He looked over at her curiously. Taking back her hand, he held it, but a little too tightly. 'You're absolutely right. I'm sorry. It won't happen again. Now relax. And let's enjoy the trip. Hong Kong is going to be important Quite something. You wouldn't want to miss it The greatest coup of my entire career. And I want you right up there beside me when the world takes notice.'

Jane's small hand was captive, fluttering hopelessly like a caged bird striving to be free. She looked away from him and out of the window, involuntary tears welling. Why did she always end up such a victim in relationships? Was it her? Some signal she unconsciously sent out to predatory men? Here I am, come hurt me. Or was it simply life? The legacy of centuries, the powerful wanting to own the rare and beautiful. Hong Kong was going to be important for her too. She sensed that her future was going to be decided there. Whether Blake was to have any part in it, she was still unsure. But she was anxious to find out.

Trent had bought some clothes for the journey, along with a holdall. There were a couple of hours to go before he needed to be at the airport to collect his United Airline ticket to Hong Kong, and he killed the time in a bar in the old Mexican quarter of Los Angeles. There was a chance that the Bureau just might have figured out what he was planning, but he doubted it. They would have assumed he was going after Beeker. Or possibly that Beeker had somehow snatched him. Not difficult, he thought cynically. It had been no problem getting by the police guard on his hospital door when he had casually walked out earlier. The officer had been down the hall, his back to his station, talking to a nurse. In fact Trent felt bad for the trouble he would cause the young man. He had done enough boring protection duty himself to know that there is almost always one or more potential lapses on everyone's watch.

What was really occupying his mind, however, was his Roscoe – Bureau jargon for a gun. He had with him his 9mm semi-automatic. But using his creds to try to take a firearm on board a regular flight

was far from easy. Airport red tape for federal agents was notorious, despite the prevailing image of their simply having to wave a badge. Once, when following a suspect on board, Trent had – as required – declared his firearm to the airline, only to have his cover blown by the pilot coming over to say hi.

He would ditch his gun and somehow get hold of another in Hong Kong. He did not know the city. But he knew street life. Finding a firearm should present no problem. Looking at his watch, he decided to get something to eat to kill time. His arm was still hellish sore, but he had dumped the sling, for fear that it made him conspicuous. After the bland hospital food, the biting Mexican cuisine was overpowering, giving him acid burn. Hardly an ideal lining for a long flight.

At the airport, he collected his tickets and checked in, having dumped his gun in a left-luggage lock-up. Still an hour to kill, and his professional conscience was getting the better of him. He did not want the LAPD wasting man-hours and resources hunting for him, and possibly diverting their energies from the search for Fuji. Finding a pay-phone, he called Dandino.

'It's me. Trent. I'm OK. Call off the dogs.'

'Shit! Where the hell are you? The balloon's really gone up here. Your people in New York are going crazy.' Dandino was angry, not relieved. 'To hear them we couldn't protect a candy store from a five-year-old.'

'I'm sorry about all the heat. But I couldn't help it,' Trent said, really feeling for the man. He had made him look incompetent, and the lapse would sit on his file like an open sore. 'Look. I'm hanging up soon before you try and trace this. I'm not going after Beeker. And I've not been taken. I just wanted you to know that to save you wasting people and time looking for me.'

'And how the hell do I know that? Huh? How the hell do I know that someone doesn't have a gun at your head right now? Tell me that?'

'I can't, Pete. It's down to you believing me. That's it.' Trent sympathised. Dandino was a good cop trying to follow procedures. 'I need some time to myself. That's all I can say. That's it. I have to go.' Airport announcements were being made, and he was afraid that Dandino would recognise the distinctive sound.

'OK. Whatever. I guess I know when a man's genuine, and when

he's talking with a Remington up his ass. Good luck. Whatever it is. You need anything, you call me – you hear?'

'You got it, Pete. And thanks.'

Blake smiled back at his Chinese counterpart, a middle-aged government information officer. They were sitting at a table in the Mandarin, in the room to be used three days later for the press conference. Most of the arrangements had been finalised, more or less to the satisfaction of both sides. The main point of difference, as always, had been the Chinese insistence on wanting lots of officials on the top table, and for long, flowery speeches. Blake had won as much ground as he could by reducing the number of Chinese to five, and had brought them round to his idea of issuing the full texts of speeches – as long as they liked – with shorter presentations at what he was calling the signing ceremony picture call What now had to be sorted out, however, was going to be much more difficult.

The Chinese had surprisingly changed their mind about questions, and were now wanting to invite them Blake had forwarded his first draft of possible questions, along with suggested answers, the night before. There had been no response yet. The whole concept of double-guessing Q&As was alien to the Chinese, their government unused to facing free questioning from an aggressive world media. But it was important, he had stressed, for SGT and the Chinese delegation to agree their responses in advance. What only he and Mitchell knew, however, was that if all now went to plan, if Blake could pull it off, then the press conference would not even be held, and the car deal with SGT aborted.

'Are there any other questions you think may be asked?' he probed.

'We are considering,' the man replied. 'And you?'

With a silent prayer, Blake launched himself into the Q&As he *had* rehearsed – rehearsed so carefully with Mitchell. 'Just one. About what Chairman Sool should say if asked about the vampire worm.'

'Yes. This virus is very damaging. It has already arrived in China. A little. It has seriously affected SGT?'

'Well, it's rather worse than that, I'm afraid,' Blake said, rubbing his chin and looking uncomfortable. 'You see, the worm actually originated at SGT's computer company in England. Chiasmus.

This so far has not been admitted, and I must ask you to keep it confidential. As SGT's new partner.' He gave the official a sharp look, and was pleased to see that he at last commanded his complete attention. 'But the thing has now spread so widely that the task force, set up to find an effective antidote, must now identify all systems which could be affected. It's a bit like tracing disease carriers. And for this to work, the original source – Chiasmus and SGT – will soon be announced. We know some journalists already suspect SGT, and may use the conference to ask Chairman Sool about it.' Light the blue touchpaper and retire, Blake thought to himself.

'Oh really?' The man made no attempt to hide his reaction. 'This is very serious, I think.'

'Indeed it is. SGT's lawyers are bracing themselves for multi-billion-dollar lawsuits. And you can only imagine the reaction of key customers when they find out that SGT caused this whole thing, and was not just an early victim. So I think it better if I ask Chairman Sool to refuse to answer questions about this from the platform, don't you? After all, we must not associate your minister with the scandal in any way. That would be very unfair.'

'Yes. Yes. No association.' The man stood up, panic written all over his normally impassive face. 'Excuse me, please. But I must discuss this.'

'Of course,' Blake said, also standing. 'But remember. I must insist you keep what I have told you strictly confidential.'

With hurried gestures, the man fled to his masters. Without a shadow of doubt, it meant the end of Sool's dream And effectively the end of SGT. Blake sat down heavily in the half-lit room, suddenly conscious of the enormity of what he had just done. Mitchell had convinced him it was all for Queen and Country. That Sool was some kind of monster. But still . . . What *had* he done? And to a client.

19

Richter's sex life was not a success. Overweight and slovenly, he simply was not physically attractive. But only two lays in his twenty-six years was embarrassing as well as frustrating

His shyness was another block, not helped by the petulant intellectual arrogance he used as a defence, and certainly not by his indifference to bathing, or the marsh aromas that defeated even the most powerful deodorants. So when the Dutch girl at the conference had taken an interest in him, his hormones had come out of hibernation with indecent speed, leaving him a quivering, expectant wreck. She was an out-of-work programmer, bumming round Europe. Mid-twenties, with short blonde punky hair, wide mouth and fun blue eyes, she dressed to emphasise her passing resemblance to Annie Lennox.

She had made a play for Richter having heard him brilliantly demolish the arguments of one of the key conference speakers. The subject of the talk had been the use of 'sniffers' for hacking These are programs used by network managers to read and capture network information, including directories of passwords in use.

If hackers gained access to a company's 'sniffer' software, the organisation would be completely at their mercy. It was a particular issue for banks and others with cash management systems. The speaker was making the case that 'sniffer' programs – especially when combined with pre-defined customer transfer routes – were potentially a powerful defence against hacking, giving the program managers a detailed real-time overview of who was doing what on their system. Richter, however, described the most sophisticated 'sniffer' program so far developed, for a British clearing bank – and then explained exactly how he had already penetrated it from his living room using the Satan Tool to identify weaknesses in the network. The delegates had cheered him, and the lecturer was also generous, conceding that the best IT brains still remained on the outside Just as in the Wild West, when the best outlaws had known at least as much about bank safes and security as Pinkerton's.

Like fat children who become graceful heroes at swimming galas, so to her Richter had become graceful and desirable in his chosen element. She had decided to make the first move, and following a lunchtime drink in a wine bar, they had gone back to his cheap guest-house room. The dour Glaswegian landlady had glowered at them, but let her up as it was still so early. They had claimed to be working on a conference project together. Once inside his small room, the sweltering heat from the large, old-fashioned radiator under the window hit them, its regulator – long since broken – jammed on maximum. They needed no excuses to take off their clothes, however. The girl had already stripped by the time he returned from the bathroom, and he looked over at her, unable to believe his luck Tearing off his anorak, he almost fell over, and they tumbled on the small bed giggling. As she began to undress him, computers suddenly seemed a very poor second in life's priorities to Richter. Sex. That was the answer. Nothing else mattered. The most important thing there is, he suddenly decided. Why had he not realised this before . . .?

His hand was pawing her small breasts, hers tugging at his belt. She was panting loudly, as was Richter who was by now terrified of three things: the landlady hearing them and investigating, the very real likelihood of him ejaculating too soon, and another asthmatic attack. But then, something else went wrong. It could not be! The familiar, persistent electronic trill intruded, breaking the magic. 'What is that?' the girl asked,

giggling. Unlike Richter, she most definitely had not suffered from a deprived sex life.

'Damn it! It's my mobile phone,' he cursed. 'I'll ignore it.' He lifted himself up to make it easier for her to undress him. They began panting again, desperate for what each knew would be a short, cataclysmic first time. But after a while the girl stopped, the trill still audible.

'You have to answer that thing or switch it off,' she demanded. 'It's driving me crazy.'

Cursing himself for not having programmed in the message service, Richter got off the bed, pulled his trousers up to hide his erection from her, and took the phone out of his anorak pocket. '*Ja*! Richter!' he thundered.

'Gerhard, I must talk to you. Urgently. Something's come up.' Miss Wilkins's unknowing irony was not lost on Richter. He could feel his 'something' rapidly deflating at the passion-killing sound of her antiseptic voice.

'Yes. But not now. Please. I call you,' he pleaded.

'Very well. But in the next hour. This can't wait.'

'Neither can this,' he replied, and switched the thing off. Trying to compose himself, he had the bright idea of thinking of Miss Wilkins if he got close to climaxing too soon. The call had not been a complete waste.

The girl was now lying back, with a dreamy look in her eyes. 'Come back to bed,' she said in her sexy Dutch accent.

He needed no urging, and lay beside her as she again set about taking off his pants. With a practised one-handed flick, she had the belt undone and he kicked off his trousers, embarrassingly having to free one leg which had got stuck. At last they were both naked and one hot hand was gripping him, her other teasing with a long fingernail. 'Gerhard,' she whispered, looking down at him and flicking her tongue over her lips. 'If you close the curtains I will give you a special treat.' Her huge mouth curled into a mischievous smile, her meaning unambiguous.

It was something he had dreamed about so often. His ultimate fantasy. Trying hard not to seem too desperate, he swung his legs over and went to the window. Leaning forward, he clutched the curtains in each hand and began to draw them together. Then suddenly, as the room was plunged into darkness, he let out a harrowing scream, and went on screaming before collapsing into

a fetal heap on the floor. The naked Dutch girl reached him seconds before the landlady burst in and switched on the light.

In his eagerness to close the curtains, leaning forward, he had poked his erection in the scorching radiator and it had stuck momentarily between the scalding heat fins. Huge blisters were already forming, the delicate skin raw and about as painful as pain can get. Clutching himself, he looked up at the two shocked women, and moaned pathetically in agony, frustration and self-pity.

The landlady was quick to take control. Grabbing the orange candlewick bedspread, she threw it over Richter as if he were a noisy parrot. 'I want the pair of you out Now. Right now!'

'Mr Mitchell? John Blake. I need to talk. Is it OK over the regular line?' Blake was in his room at the Peninsula.

'If you can talk a little obliquely. What is it?' It was the middle of the night in England, and the duty officer had roused Mitchell from his bed at home.

Blake told him about the meeting with the Chinese official, using as much coded language as he could. 'He was shocked. They will certainly pull out. That's my view. But they'll have to do it in a way that does not lose them face.'

'What do you think they'll do?'

Blake thought for a moment before replying. 'Being in my job, maybe I would say this – but my bet is on them leaking the SGT link to the, er, computer difficulties.' He cursed himself for having used SGT's name on the open line. But then again, dammit, he was no expert in this shady world.

'That's pretty well what we expected. It's all going to plan so far. So why did you call me? Getting a bit windy? Perfectly natural if you are.'

'Yes, I'm getting windy, as you put it. It feels pretty lonely out here, doing what I'm doing You know – realising that I effectively signed that corporation's death warrant just now It feels like a pretty despicable thing to have done. But I suppose you people, you professionals, get used to these things ' If he sounded bitter, he did not care.

'Oh, these are things none of us ever really get used to. Even the pros.' Mitchell realised that Blake needed reassurance, praise. And he *had* done well. 'Keep in mind what this is all about. The things you now know about our man And why it's so important

to stop him. Before other atrocities begin. You're doing a first-rate job in very difficult circumstances. It will soon be over for you. Just another couple of days and you can go back to normality. And you have the local number to call if you need anything, anything at all from my people out there. You still have that, don't you?'

'Yes Thanks. Look, I'm OK really. I just needed to touch base with you, and talk to someone. However bad our man is, what I just did is still pretty awesome from where I'm sitting. But I'm OK. Don't worry. I'll call you again if I need you.'

'Fine. In fact I'm off tomorrow – actually later today – to Seoul. With some people who might be able to help us shake off this "flu virus". But I can be contacted any time through my people here if you need me. Even if I'm in-flight. OK? And good luck '

Blake hung up and sipped his Johnnie Walker Black, looking out over the harbour to the lights of Hong Kong Island. The Star ferry to his right was halfway across on its seven-minute journey to Edinburgh Place, and to his left – by the huge Fuji neon sign – was the Hong Kong Yacht Club where he had so many good friends. He could picture them sipping drinks on the terrace, looking over at his own tower block, built by the Peninsula a few years earlier on to the hotel's classical frontage. He might take Jane to the club tomorrow for lunch. There, or maybe for *dim sum* at the bustling Round Dragon in Wanchai, at the top of the Hopewell Centre, once the tallest building on the island As the Scotch mellowed his mood and soothed him, he began to see the positive side of things. After all, he had met Jane, a special lady whatever happened to their spluttering half-relationship. And he had almost forgotten the money. The $400,000 from the golf game. He had told Mitchell about it, and there had been no to attempt to force him to give it back. It was now sitting happily in his bank account. As ever, with just one more whisky the world suddenly seemed a far better place.

Trent had barely been able to sleep on the fifteen hour flight. They had seated him next to two noisy, badly behaved Hong Kong Chinese children. Their parents had travelled up front in business class to get some peace, and save money. The mother had come back-of-bus a couple of times, going through the motions of checking them out. If he had not needed a low profile he would have told her – in his excellent Cantonese – what a selfish, inconsiderate bastard she was. But instead he did his best to shut out the lousy

world with earplugs and an eye-mask. Still he was exhausted when they touched down at Kai Tak Airport early Tuesday, almost a day and a half later – thanks to the sixteen hour time difference. He had only hand baggage, and having changed $2000 into local currency, was soon having to decide on a base. There was a Tourist Association desk at the airport offering to find hotel beds, but he still needed that low profile. Instead he queued for one of the red, silver-topped Toyota taxis and tried to get help from the driver, deliberately speaking English. A *gweilo* with good Cantonese would be remembered.

'I need a cheap place to stay. Any suggestions?'

'American?' he called, looking at Trent suspiciously. He had noted his lack of serious baggage.

'Canadian,' he lied.

'Where you want? Hong Kong? Or Kowloon maybe. Hong Kong better.'

And a longer fare, Trent thought. 'What's the best hotel? In either? If I was a big shot millionaire, where would I stay?'

The driver thought. 'There are two maybe. Mandarin. And Peninsula.'

'Which is the best? The most expensive?'

'Dunno.'

'Where would you like to stay?'

The man barked a laugh. 'This millionaire? Wha! I think Peninsula! Rolls-Royces!'

'OK. Find me a cheap place, near the Peninsula.' Trent had no idea where Sool would be staying, but this was his best shot until he had a chance to make some phone calls.

'Peninsula. Here in Kowloon. You want cheap place? Or cheap cheap?'

Trent wanted invisibility, minimum formalities – and in the States that generally meant as cheap and nasty as could be found. 'Cheap cheap,' he replied grimly.

The driver knew exactly where to go. The Tsim Sha Tsui area, off Nathan Road, north of the Peninsula. Here are found the dilapidated buildings that are the base for countless guest houses, the haunt of budget travellers, where it is still possible to share dormitory rooms with other backpackers. The cheapest beds in town, after the YMCA. The cab pulled up outside one 'hotel', seemingly at random 'No many millionaire here,' he grinned

malevolently. 'But also no service charge. No government tax. No registration.'

Trent grabbed his bag, paid the driver and steeled himself to enter the stinking building. A few hours' sleep, a shower and a shave, then he would get down to work. He had set himself two tasks for the day. Finding out where Sool and Jane Field were staying And getting his hands on a gun.

An hour later, the Gulfstream landed at Kai Tak. Sool had been sullen throughout the twenty one hour flight, sitting with Park and working much of the time on papers and a lap-top, even during the refuelling stop in Japan. He was first off and Jane and Park followed him to the waiting car. The immigration and customs formalities over, a Peninsula Rolls-Royce whisked them to the hotel. When they had checked in, Jane immediately knew something was wrong. Sool had given her a room of her own in their suite. Previously they had always slept together She was relieved, yet it frightened her. It was obvious he knew something – but how much?

'I will not need you until this evening. We are meeting people for drinks at seven,' he said, as if to a Filipina maid. 'Please wear something attractive, but not too showy.'

She was tempted to curtsey ironically, but her good sense warned her that the man was not in any mood for games. 'Who will be there?' she asked.

'Some Chinese ministry people. And Blake.' He watched her reaction carefully, but could detect nothing unusual.

Eight hours uninterrupted sleep followed by a luxurious bath, watching MTV on the screen in the wall, made her feel much better. And she was soon to see Blake again. She wanted to look her best Her trunks had been unpacked for her as she slept and, wearing a thick, fluffy white hotel towelling robe, she inspected the outfits hung before her in the walk-in dressing room. Her Trump Tower maid had thought of everything, right down to her politically incorrect but gorgeous ankle-length mink, still hanging in its huge black Genny-branded cover, the size of a body bag. The creation she finally selected for the evening was a simple and classic black Valentino cocktail dress. With her hair up, and the pearl choker, she knew she would meet Sool's demands and still look stunning for Blake.

Sool had kept to his own rooms all day, working with Park, but he

knocked at her door on the stroke of seven, and they went down in the elevator to reception, turned right in the lobby and right again to the elevators for the Peninsula tower block. They rode up in silence to the top floor and into the long narrow bar of the Felix. It had been reserved for their private party, and champagne was flowing freely. Blake hurried over to meet them, exchanging a secret look with Jane.

'Who is here? What must I do?' Sool asked him with distaste. He hated public bars and restaurants and only attended such functions under protest.

'We have the middle-ranking ministry people. But the top government brass surprisingly haven't showed up. Strange because this evening was their idea, not ours.'

Sool looked at him sharply. 'Does that send a signal? Is there something they're not happy about?' There was fear in his eyes.

'I don't know,' Blake replied, non-committally. 'Some political balloon could have gone up that has nothing to do with us.'

Sool then snapped into the smiling, charming man he could be when it suited him, bowing, shaking hands, exchanging cards with people he did not know. Blake had to admit that he was brilliant at it. The man's talents were still impressive, despite all he now knew about him

Jane was also on good corporate form, showing just the right amount of deference, balanced with the authority that went with being the woman of the *taipan*. He moved down the awkward bar to be near her, the night lights of the region twinkling through the panoramic windows. One Chinese had just returned from the men's room and was excitedly telling his colleagues all about it, urging them to pay a visit. Blake knew exactly what had stunned the man. The four urinals were positioned directly in front of a clear, unscreened floor-to-ceiling window, and you felt as though you were pissing down on the whole of Hong Kong. 'Before it craps on *you*,' as he once heard an Australian guy comment.

Jane also was manoeuvring herself towards him. 'Tomorrow's fine with me,' she said, avoiding eye contact. If Sool was watching she could have been talking to any one of three people.

'Me too. We'll have lunch on the island. I'll send one of my women to collect you at 12.30 in the lobby. She'll know you, so don't worry about who to look for.'

'Maybe I'll carry a pair of old golf shoes. For old times' sake,' she smiled, moving away towards another group.

How long ago that first meeting in Las Vegas now seemed. And how much had happened since. Blake smiled to himself at the memory, and then got back to work.

Miss Wilkins settled in and rammed her book in the seat pocket in front. It was Thomas Mann's whopping *Magic Mountain* which she had never got round to. A thirteen-hour flight sandwiched between Richter and Mitchell seemed the ideal time to rectify that. That apart, she was excited about seeing something of Korea. Her own travels had been mostly confined to southern Europe, Africa and the Middle East. The Far East had always seemed so alien, when there was still so much to understand about history and culture nearer home.

Richter was in a foul mood, for reasons she did not fully understand. That he was in some kind of pain and discomfort was clear. When she had asked him about it he had blushed and muttered something about spilling hot coffee in his lap. In fact, the radiator burn had necessitated a visit to Casualty where his injuries had evoked some unwelcome and unprofessional ribaldry from the young houseman and the nurses. They had even called over a group of trainee surgeons touring the wards especially to see him. The suppressed mirth had been palpable, and one student's stage-whispered suggestion that they 'fix the pain but leave the swelling behind' had received only a half-hearted rebuke.

The humiliation had at least clarified the decision as to whether or not he should do as Miss Wilkins had asked, to co-operate on stopping the Helminth. He had needed to get away and regain his self-confidence. Being fêted by the world's leading authorities on computer security was as good a way as any. Anyhow, even he had become afraid of the monster he had unleashed. The need to stop it was giving the governmental and big-business thought police all the excuses they needed to poke around the net. This had been one of the issues raised at the conference. They were already starting to use the Helminth as a pretext to censor what was to Richter, and his fellow surfers, the last bastion of free intellectual expression. He did not want to go down in history as the man who burst the Internet dream. The trip to Korea was good. Killing off the Helminth was good.

Just prior to the noon departure, Mitchell had arranged for him to

be interviewed, in the teleconference suite at Heathrow's business centre, by the chairman of the task force. It was immediately clear to Richter that they had effectively got nowhere, the incredibly laborious job of decompiling barely under way.

'Mr Richter, the vampire worm is without any shadow of doubt the most brilliant, original, elegant program of its type any of us has experienced,' the chairman had said He had been briefed to flatter Richter. The reality was he actually meant it. 'Extremely well written and executed. I've programmed LAN *diagnostic* worms myself – for, er, rather different reasons to your own, of course.'

'You like the randomisation?' Richter was fishing for further compliments. He knew of the American, who was something of a hero to him.

'Oh, sure. If it hadn't been for that, I think we might have been close to cracking it by now.'

'So how far have you got?'

'We now have a disassembler program, which has automated some of the laborious work on our decompiler line. But we're weeks rather than days away from breaking through. What we desperately need is your original source program. But even if you give that to us now, before you travel, we'll still need all your genius when you get to Seoul. To help my team and the SGT technicians. That baby you gave birth to has grown up a *lot* since you last saw him. What do you say? It'd be a privilege to work alongside you. And I think only you can now stop it. We need you.'

Right then Richter desperately needed to be needed.

'Say yes, and it'll certainly help scale down any pressure for criminal charges. Against Miss Wilkins. Even against poor Mrs Spink,' Mitchell had added to pile on the pressure. 'And against you. As someone already on bail, they'd normally throw the book at you.'

'OK. I ll do it,' Richter had said pompously, with the air of someone doing them all a big favour. 'I'll help you. For sure.' With that he had handed Mitchell a computer disk containing his source program, so it could be relayed over to Seoul while they were in the air.

Mitchell had not been keen on accompanying them personally. He certainly did not want them travelling all that way alone, discussing things, and perhaps changing their minds. But someone more junior could have covered that. In the end it had been his deputy chief who had decided. Keeping the flaky Richter sweet was absolutely vital, and Miss Wilkins was the key to that. It had been clear that

Mitchell's distant connection with her father had been significant to her, irrationally so, and it just might count if things started to go wrong. In addition there was the curious telephone relationship she had stumbled into with Sool, and that could also prove valuable. It was not a job for a bag carrier.

They were two hours into the flight, with lunch out of the way and Richter morosely watching a movie, when Mitchell asked her about the latest contact with Sool. He had in fact phoned early the previous evening from New York, at the Trump Tower apartment before collecting Jane. She had herself tried to reach him on the Sat-phone many times prior to this, but he had been in-flight from the Philippines. He knew the pilot did not like him using the Sat-phone on board and so he generally left the unit switched off, knowing he was still reachable on the plane's system.

'How long did you speak?' Mitchell asked, keeping his voice low.

'You tell me. I thought you would have had a transcript by now. From your electronic eavesdroppers,' she replied with heavy sarcasm. She still had not fully made up her mind about Mitchell.

He laughed. 'You certainly learn quickly But it can take a day to reach me.'

She gave him a sideways look and relented a little. 'A longish call, this one. I'd say nearly ten minutes. He called me. The man was obviously upset about something, so I told him that Richter and I had decided to help him. Like he asked. By reversing the worm thing. As you know, I was pretty sure I'd get Richter to agree. But he surprised me by saying he already knew about it, from his SGT people working with the task force. That was why he was calling. To thank me. So his people knew we were coming before I'd even talked to Richter . . . I wonder how.'

'Yes, yes, all right. You can blame me for that. I was also pretty sure you'd get him to agree. And if you hadn't, I had a few things of my own with which to twist Richter's arm.' He glanced over at the German, but he still had the headphones on and was glued to the screen.

'Well, it seems to have worked. He was grateful, and became surprisingly chatty. I asked him what was wrong, and he said that he and his woman were having difficulties. She had let him down in some way. Betrayed him, was his exact phrase. Do you know the person?'

'It's an American model. Well known. Name of Jane Field.'

The name meant nothing to Miss Wilkins. 'Well, I'm not sure I'd like to be in her shoes. He was pretty angry with her. You'd better warn her if he really is as dangerous as you make out.'

'You still doubt that, don't you? Despite having seen the video.'

'That film was the vilest thing I've ever experienced. If you tell me that Sool was behind it, I have to bow to your knowledge and judgment. But yes, I do still find it hard to associate your monster Sool with the corporate bully I know. That's all.'

'What else did you discuss?'

'Korea. We talked about that. I told him I was looking forward to my visit, and he told me a few places I should try and see. Seoul Tower Ch'angdok Palace and Piwon, the Secret Garden A Han River boat trip. A visit to Cheju Island if I have time to get out of Seoul. But especially, I had to visit the Hall of Independence. To witness the atrocities inflicted on Koreans by the Japanese. He virtually made me promise to do this. Otherwise I might not understand.'

'Understand what?'

'Search me. But he became extremely animated when talking about it. That apart, he's obviously immensely proud of his country.'

'And the big secret. Did you ask about that? About the visit by his aunt?'

'I did. And he sort of laughed. He assumed that I'd read of it in a magazine article about him. The story keeps getting repeated because of that, he said. I tried to press him further but he just came back to the Hall of Independence exhibition. When I went, I'd understand. Only his aunt and he knew. But if I saw the exhibition, maybe I could forgive him.'

Mitchell thought for a while. 'Then maybe you should go to this exhibition. And maybe you should also see his aunt. I understand she's still alive Something of a recluse. On Chindo Island.'

He did not tell her of his fear of an imminent outrage, some spectacular terrorist attack by Sool. Just before he left, the Moscow station had sheepishly reported that the watchers had lost Yuri Dzerzhinsky – news that was potentially already more than twelve hours old He had gone back to some prostitute's room, but when he did not reappear and they questioned her later, the woman admitted that he had paid her then left immediately by the fire escape. A deliberate manoeuvre to throw off any followers The key thing for

all watchers to have clear on a mission is what exactly is the most important priority: not to lose the tail, or not to let the target know he or she is under surveillance. The clear priority in this case – a deserter always having to look over his shoulder – was the former, and Mitchell was predictably angry. At least his first question had been anticipated by the luckless station. They had a list of all the international flights out that night.

The one that intuitively interested Mitchell had been a scheduled Aeroflot service to Japan. It had already landed in Tokyo. 'Get the passenger list Show his picture to the check-in people. Get the FSB on board with us, and have them send it to the Aeroflot stewardesses. See if they had video monitoring of that flight at boarding,' he had ordered. 'I want to know if he's in Tokyo And tell the FSB that if there is an attack of some description it will be by one of their *shaiki*, and they'll be right alongside us to face the flak for not stopping it.'

All Sool's attacks on Japan so far had been at arm's length, on American soil, and through the stock and money markets. Something told Mitchell that it would not be long before the vendetta took him right to the heart of his old enemy. Into the Imperial Empire itself. And the only possible lead on what form this might take, and at whom it might be directed, was buried in Sool's secret. They had to break it. And fast.

20

Trent had noticed telltale smudges of blood on the wall of his small attic room Bed bugs. He stripped the mattress – which with so many overlaid stains looked like an ordnance survey map – threw it on the floor, shook out a sheet and slept fitfully on the hard but moderately clean box-spring base On waking later that day, he washed and then made for the Holiday Inn Golden Mile, which he had seen on his way over in the cab. Finding a telephone booth, he called Dandino in L.A, to check for any news on Fuji. As soon as he realised there was none, he hung up to avoid having to lie and mislead his partner any more than he had already. Then he called the Peninsula and asked to be put through to a Mr Sool Kay-Sheen. He was informed that Sool was not in his room, and had gone out for dinner.

Bingo! he thought Got him with his very first call. A good omen, he decided. The first mission already completed. The next, finding a gun, would be much more difficult

He walked further south down Nathan Road towards the Peninsula, to fix his bearings, and to look for places from which to observe

Jane Field's movements over the next two days. This seemed to present no problem, as he checked out the buildings opposite the hotel – the Space Museum and Theatre, and the Cultural Centre alongside. A quick stroll through the hotel lobby threw up plenty of other watching places inside – the shops to the right, the smart, gilded Lobby Restaurant to the left, the endless meeters-and-greeters in the centre. Once he had sourced the gun he would be back, to watch for her return from dinner and to see what, if any, protection Sool and she were using. Finding a place to hold her was altogether a bigger problem. His garret room was the only possibility, but far from ideal. One thing at a time, however, he chided himself. Don't get overwhelmed by the enormity of what you're trying to do, or you won't be able to function. So far so good.

His recce on the way down to the Peninsula had already established his next destination for later – the notorious Peking Road, barely a spit from his guest house. It was mid-evening when he returned and already the women touts were out, hustling for customers for their girlie bars. For how long the Chinese would permit them to operate, no one knew. Trent cruised up and down several times, moving into the adjacent streets, watching, trying to decide which seemed the most professional, the best organised. It was all hunch, intuition, but that was all he had to go on. His shoulder was really giving him hell. The bed base had not been the ideal resting place, and he swallowed dry two of the painkillers bought on his way back from a health shop he had found among the camera and electronic stores, the eating houses and the clothes and jewellery traders. Then he decided on one of the bars. A particularly attractive girl – a league above the others – was doing the hustling, while a tough-looking man in a jacket was not too far in the background. If his hunch was right, this would be a Triad joint. And the Triads carried.

'Take me, I'm yours,' he said, slurring his words like a drunk.

'Inside! Inside! Many girls!' she shrieked, already looking over his shoulder for the next punter.

Trent smiled and went in, falling drunkenly against the doorman. His hand brushed against a gun held in a shoulder harness under the man's left arm. Bingo again.

'Inside' was extremely dark, noisy and embarrassingly empty. By Peking Road standards it was still early. There were a number of tables, only about a quarter of them in play. An ugly waitress in

a pink tank-top and black mini-skirt showed him to an empty one and asked for his order.

'Beer!' he yelled over the deafening Canto-pop music.

'Which wha?'

'Molsen! You got Molsen?' he called, trying to keep his Canadian cover.

'Nah! Nah Molsen!'

He looked at the nearest table, his eyes adjusting to the darkness. 'OK. San Miguel!'

The waitress disappeared, and Trent took in the geography of the place. There were cubicles around the side, a tiny disco-dance floor not in use, the bar to his left, and the men's room dimly lit straight ahead on the opposite side. He stood up and went to relieve himself, to get his bearings and to see if there was such a thing as a fire exit. The toilet stank. An old Chinese man was at the steel trough urinal noisily and persistently coughing up and spitting phlegm, a sound that is Hong Kong's dawn chorus. Having established that there was no other exit, Trent walked unsteadily back to his table.

Almost immediately an attractive if hard-looking young girl came over with his beer. One of three or four hostesses. She was totally naked except for her lace pants 'Here you' beer!' she said unnecessarily. 'You American? Yes?'

'Canadian.'

'Mel Gibsom. You look like Mel Gibsom. Very handsome. Very handsome. Mad Max. I like! I call you Max.'

'Thank you! You are also very pretty!' And indeed she was. Despite his mission, Trent found the bouncy, boss-eyed, immature breasts, inches from his face, already stirring his loins. Her constant eye contact with him was also turning him on, giving out a completely unselfconscious impression of anything-goes sex.

She spoke about nothing for a couple more minutes, then left him. Trent knew the form. If he tried to leave now by just paying tops for a beer, he would suddenly discover that a 'service charge' had been added, to the tune of at least HK$500 in old money. For talking to the topless hostess. Any attempt to dispute it would invite a visit by the resident Red Pole. These were the low-grade public face of the various Triad gangs, the heavies who carried out the threats and worse of the leaders. Either young disaffected teenagers from the Tai Wai high-rise estates, with proud gang tattoos on their chests, or

older men from a generation which, Stanley Prison apart, had never known any other employer or code of life. Either way, they were lethal, experienced street fighters – most with martial arts skills.

Trent downed one more beer before calling for the check. The dowdy waitress had brought it over this time, and he prepared himself for what was to come, hoping to hell his arm would hold up.

'Hey, hey, hey! Get over here!' he called back to her, still feigning drunkenness. 'What's this shit? I had two beers. So what is this? You ripping me off?'

The girl looked scared and turned towards the door, waving.

'Two beer And you talk to hostess. See sign. Bill right!'

'Balls! Get me the manager. I'll report you to the HKTA!'

From nowhere the man on the door had appeared at his side. He was young, early twenties, but well built and confident-looking. His English accent showed traces of American movies. 'You pay. Or you *pay*. You understan'?' he said, with enough menace to scare any of the gullible sit-at-the-back voyeurs he normally had to deal with. Trent did not look too different. A drunk. No great muscles in evidence. *Gweilo* shit.

Trent looked up, fear on his face. 'OK. OK. No need to get heavy, man,' he stuttered. 'I'll pay. Here. Take it.' He handed over the cash to the waitress, who was now sneering at him, barking insults about him to the doorman in Cantonese. What she did not know was that Trent understood every filthy word.

'Out. Now you? leave!' the doorman shouted, playing to the small gallery of other nervous customers.

'Yeah, yeah. I'm going,' Trent mouthed thickly. 'Help me up the stairs, will you? I've drunk too much. You know?'

The doorman manhandled him roughly off the chair, dragging him contemptuously up the narrow staircase by his uninjured right arm. Just as Trent intended. He was on the side he wanted. And there was barely room on the stairs for any flashy martial arts from the man. The waitress followed behind them, still shouting obscenities. Then, just before they reached the top, Trent acted, knowing precisely what was about to happen, the fight choreography crystal clear in his mind. He broke his arm free, his left hand clamped to his other fist, and whipped his right elbow ferociously two-handed under the man's ribs. As the head was slumping involuntarily forward, he crouched deep to his right. This gave him the leverage to drive his

right fist in an upper-cut under the chin, smashing the jaw and teeth up into the shuddering skull. It had all been perfectly executed and his experience told him the man was already effectively senseless. Unconscious. Maybe worse. That combination could kill.

Trent's left hand drew the gun from the holster as the man fell, the waitress screaming and cowering against the wall. He had palmed the flat automatic smoothly into his pocket before the doorman had even hit the stairs. Turning to disappear into the night, he looked back at the girl. He could not resist it. Taking her quivering head in his hand, he leaned forward and whispered an obscenity in her ear, in L.A. Chinatown street Cantonese. Her eyes widened in terror and astonishment.

He had partly blown his flimsy cover. And if things went to plan, he would now have the Triads as well as the Hong Kong Chinese police, Sool's people and his own Bureau looking for him. But what the hell? That had felt *good*.

Sool started his days early, and Blake was in the vast suite with him at 6.15 the next morning. Untouched breakfasts littered the coffee table. 'This must have come from Chiasmus. From David Mann!' Sool screamed. 'I warned him. Many times. This is disobedience!'

Blake had heard a lot about Sool's legendary rages, but this was the first he had experienced personally. It was like one of Hong Kong's typhoons. Noisy, indiscriminate and dangerous. He wanted to be anywhere but where he was. 'We're checking it out in London now. It could be Mann,' Blake lied, knowing full well that the leak had come from the Chinese. On the eve of the people's car announcement.

Before them were copies of what had started the storm. The Reuters newswire Blake had brought round. It named Chiasmus and SGT as the source of the Helminth worm now paralysing the world's computer systems. Prior to this there had been huge speculation about its origins, some of it fingering Chiasmus. But to balance this other computer giants had also been suspected, along with Russian and Eastern Europe hackers, and American students playing around with powerful university kit. All the main computer industry stocks worldwide had been hit, with the exception of a handful of quoted software houses whose share prices had rocketed following claims of their trialling antidote programs.

'It's a mess. When the Chinese see this they will be very, very

worried. In fact, maybe they already knew last night! Maybe that is why no senior officials attended the reception. What do you think?' The fear on Sool's face was plain as his quick mind worked out the impact on his plans of the many possible permutations All of them bad. 'Might they even pull out?'

This was crunch time for Blake. He was cheating and lying for his country, but still it was not easy. 'They might try and delay,' he suggested. 'Until the full facts are known. And until they decide whether or not a partnership link with you, a corporation associated with such a scandal, would hurt them. A delay is more likely.'

'A delay is no good!' Sool howled. 'You know that. The derivatives. They give me no time for delays. If the Nikkei does not fall fast tomorrow, SGT is dead. Bust. Don't you understand?'

'We could issue a denial. Threaten to sue.' It was good PR advice for someone in Sool's hopeless position. The big lie.

'Good. Yes. Do it.' Sool always attacked when cornered.

'I'll go and draft something now. Then, after you've seen it, clear it with the lawyers.'

'No. No time for lawyers. You do it now. Here.'

Blake was alarmed PR consultancies are treated as publishers by the courts, and if he issued anything actionable on behalf of Sool, then Globecom could be sued along with SGT. In any case it would be suicidal for a leading international PR group to become involved in calling the mighty Reuters liars. Not least when he knew full well they had reported the truth . . . He cursed himself for making the suggestion without thinking it through. 'I really will need a lawyer to clear the draft. It's something we insist on, for our indemnity cover,' he countered.

'You are being paid very well for services that have not amounted to very much so far.' Sool was in no mood for niceties. 'Sit there and do it. Now!' He shot up and came towards Blake, who was still seated, grabbing his lapels in both hands and shaking him. Then his right hand hit him hard across the face. It was not the pain but the shock of the incident which stunned Blake. Sool's face was inches from his, contorted into a snarl.

So at last the monster had fully been revealed to him. The real Sool behind the smiling façade, his normally pleasant features now ugly and convulsed, his self-control totally evaporated as he danced to the tune of some deep inner fury. This *was* a man who could order the butchery of Japanese girls, as well as single-handedly attempting

a financial run on an entire nation. He had to be stopped. Blake tried to clear his mind to decide how to react. Hitting him back, or standing up to him, would only result in him being fired and thrown out. Blake was, he knew, Mitchell's only insider, and doing what his temperament screamed for would be self-defeating. Turning the other cheek was literally the right thing to do, if they were to finish the man off. Also, he knew that Jane was somewhere in the suite. Still very much at risk.

Mustering as much self-dignity as he could, Blake swallowed his pride hard, unclenched his fist and moved over to the desk to start drafting. He would produce what Sool wanted and then pretend to dictate it to the wire services, whilst in fact talking to no one. It would be the next day before Sool would become suspicious that nothing had been reported, and he would have plenty of other things on his mind by then. Get even, not angry, he kept telling himself.

Neither knew that the storm clouds had already gathered and were about to burst. Blake would never need to issue his statement. It was already too late to stop the juggernaut of the world markets. Five minutes later, when Sool was acting and speaking with him as if nothing had happened, Blake even wondered whether the man had in fact genuinely forgotten. The fury returned, however, following a conference call with his New York SGT Capital people. Wall Street had just closed, having received the Reuters piece in the last hour of trading. The reaction was about as bad for Sool and his derivatives position as it could be.

In its ruthless, quirky way, the market had seen a window of money-making opportunity in the news about SGT's association with the Helminth. It was widely known that Sool and SGT were anti-Japanese. And unlike the other *chaebol*, they had no operating or joint venture companies there, they refused to trade with Japanese suppliers and did not court Japanese customers. Further, Sool even avoided dealing with other companies who themselves had important ties with Japanese corporations or the government. Fine, said the Wall Street analysts, that means Japan's exposure to the Helminth is the lowest of all the G7 nations. The most immune. Its computer companies firewalled, the only ones not exposed to the deadly worm.

Japan was suddenly a 'buy'.

Japanese stocks traded on Wall Street had rocketed in frenetic late trading, and the yen was strengthening all around the world.

When the Tokyo stock market opened in a few hours, the Nikkei was expected to see one of its biggest single day's rise in history.

Blake had listened in, and watched Sool digest the devastating news. He had bet the corporation. And lost. Lost spectacularly. His huge global business effectively brought down by – what was the name Mitchell had mentioned? The elderly lady? A Miss Wilkins. A disgruntled ex-employee, disguised as an office cleaner. How absolutely extraordinary. Where the combined might of the FBI and MI6 had failed, a determined old spinster had succeeded. Sool's mien, his seated body rigid with shock, said it all. He was broken.

'I don't know what to say,' Blake began, but Sool held up a hand to silence him.

He stood up slowly and walked towards the window, looking out at the island, the scene of what the next day should have been his greatest triumph. 'Come over here,' he said, seemingly in control of himself. 'Look. Look at that tiny piece of land. And remember the power it had. See how beautiful it looks. Beautiful in the sunrise. But you know something? Despite the power, the economic success, and despite the beauty, two-thirds of the raw sewage from six million people goes straight into the harbour there. Untreated.'

Blake raised his eyebrows. 'I'm sorry. You've lost me.'

Sool began to shake slightly, and Blake was afraid he was about to have some kind of seizure. 'Meaning things are not what they seem,' he replied, his voice strange now, trembling and angry again. 'It means that even with the ruin of SGT, I still have power They will not escape. They will know Sool Kay-Sheen and remember what they did And nobody can stop it. Not even me.'

'Stop what? And who are "they"?' Blake pressed, knowing this was exactly the information Mitchell needed.

But Sool had been transformed for an instant back to his earlier snarling self. 'They can't stop me!' he shouted, his voice then dropping to a whisper, his mouth at Blake's ear, too close, intruding in his body space, stinking of *kimchi* garlic. 'There's a Chinese saying,' he mouthed. '"Heaven is high and the Emperor far away." And it's true. It's true . . .' He then lapsed into a bout of silent laughter, his mouth wide open, eyes tight shut, head nodding violently, his whole body racked with soundless mirth. Blake grabbed the chance to leave him, feeling more afraid now than when the man had hit him. He

was certifiable. There was no way he would let Jane go back there after they met later. For now, he needed to talk to Mitchell. As far as Blake was concerned his part in this whole sorry nightmare was now over. He wanted out. He wanted it very badly.

Mitchell had had a busy flight, spending some of it 'upstairs' with the 747 crew. He used his special authority to have the British Airways pilot send a message to his people at the British Embassy in Seoul. They were to trace Sool's aunt, and make arrangements for Miss Wilkins to visit her as soon as possible. In response they had given him the news about the Reuters piece, and its effect on Japanese stocks. Blake had been trying to talk to him, and his message was also passed on, including Sool's defiant claim that 'they' would remember him, and that no one could affect the outcome – not even him. The news from Moscow was that security monitors had indeed recorded passengers boarding the Tokyo flight, as he had expected, standard FSB procedures for all incoming and outgoing international flights. One man could have been Dzerzhinsky, but he had no beard, and wore spectacles. His old army record photo was the only image they had of him without the full-face beard, and it was a goodish resemblance. Also, the name and passport used were those of a member of his old SOBR unit who had died of septicaemia during their time in Grozny.

By the time they touched down at Kimpo International, Mitchell had a million other things he needed to do, and was already regretting making the journey He would have been more effective back in London surrounded by his support services. It was almost eleven o'clock on the Thursday morning before they had cleared the airport and got into the waiting embassy car. The white-gloved driver warned Mitchell that the notorious Seoul traffic was bad that morning, and that what should be a half-hour journey for the fifteen miles to the city would take nearer an hour and a quarter. Perhaps more. This ruled out the original plan to freshen up at the hotel, because a working lunch had been set up with the task force chairman and a senior SGT Electronics official at the corporation's headquarters.

The traffic-choked roads, some of them with six lanes each way, took them past the residential apartments on the outskirts and the commercial suburbs. Miss Wilkins looked out, fascinated at the solemn schoolgirls in navy gym slips, holding hands, the grey taxis,

the mothers with babies strapped to their backs, the maliciously scratched cars, small shops selling produce familiar and strange, blue road signs in Korean and English, the *tabang* coffee houses named after European composers – Mozart, Brahms . . . Then they were entering the banking, big-company, government-office areas, the people well dressed – especially the many beautiful, graceful women – with fleeting vistas down wide, tree-lined avenues to surprisingly close green hills and snow-capped mountains, one sporting the Dan Dare rocketship lines of Seoul Tower, the city's dated homage to modernity. There were attractive modern white commercial buildings – not too high and widely spaced – electronic advertising hoardings, expensive-looking hotels and department stores, impossibly wide roundabouts with smart, slim, whistle-blowing traffic police . . . And then suddenly the occasional sight of old Korea – pavilions, arches, palaces, long walls of ancient latticed stonework guarding centuries-old trees.

The SGT building seemed modest in the shadow of its neighbouring tower block. Mitchell led the way into the glass-fronted entrance, announcing them to the receptionist. Obviously it was still business as usual Nobody other than Sool and his SGT Capital senior management knew about the corporation's imminent collapse. They were now staring at a loss of over half a billion dollars. At the end of trading, the clearing house would make a margin call on SGT to top up its initial margin payment by the amount the market had moved against them – the variation margin: a further $70 million. And the simple fact was they were already a very highly geared corporation, with a debt-to-equity ratio of 5-to-1, a variety of charges against assets. SGT simply could not meet the margin call with cash, treasury bonds or liquid stock. They could stall until Monday but then the balloon would really go up. The supertanker was fatally holed below the waterline, but here on deck life for a short while longer was eerily going on as normal.

A young Korean collected them and, once they were badged, led them to the elevator. With his obsession with numbers Richter noticed that the buttons went from three to five He asked the Korean about this, and the man explained that the number four in Korean sounds like the word *sa*, meaning death. For this reason most buildings, and all hospitals, had no unlucky fourth floor. Their meeting room was on the ninth floor, and there were three men waiting for them – the managing director of SGT Electronics, a

stocky middle-aged Korean, and a younger, willowy man. They bowed and presented business cards, which revealed the young man to be an assistant. Each was clearly disconcerted that none of the three had cards to offer in return. How were they to know who was the most senior? Mitchell could have given them one of several in his wallet, but each would have served only to mislead them, describing him variously as an executive search consultant, sales director of an air-conditioning firm, or involved in tour operation – service front companies.

The other man was the American from their video conference at Heathrow – in his forties, tall and stooping, a professorial engineer. His card identified him as president of a Silicon Valley software house. 'Don't let that fool you,' he said, holding out his hand. 'I'm really here chairing the task force through my work with the National Security Agency.' He looked directly at Mitchell. 'The Computer Security Centre.'

Mitchell shook the firm, dry hand, knowing already from a dossier he had seen in London that the man was a brilliant but controversial figure, a multi-millionaire by his early twenties and now an increasingly active off-site figure in the highly secretive and powerful NSA. Its Computer Security Centre had originally been established to oversee and maintain high standards of protection for the military, but had long since moved into the business arena. 'Good to meet you in the flesh,' Mitchell said. 'And these are the culprits. Miss Wilkins. And Gerhard Richter.'

The American shook Miss Wilkins's hand, and said with a twinkle in his eye, 'I've heard a lot about you. Is it true you do a great line in office cleaning?'

She looked sharply back, taking an instant dislike to him. Her instincts were seldom wrong. It seemed prudent, however, to take the comment in the spirit it seemed intended. 'Garbage in, garbage out,' she replied simply, with a serene smile.

This lifted the tension and they all laughed, the Koreans a second later, a little too loudly and for a shade too long. 'And you, young man, you are the creator of the Helminth from Hell,' the chairman continued.

'Yes. It is an honour to meet you. I know of you and your company, of course,' Richter said, respectfully. 'I look forward to working with you.'

The chairman's smile now faded. 'Yes, we have work to do

together. But it's a pity it has to be under these circumstances. I guess I'm an old guy by your standards. But hell Mitnick's – what? – thirty-three now? Even I did some pretty hairy things when I was younger. Believe me. But there comes a time when you have to stop jerking off. You know? I don't want to give you the head teacher lecture here. But you have to know right off that some of the guys you're about to work alongside are pretty pissed with you. Especially the folk here at SGT. This is serious stuff. You understand?'

'Very serious,' the senior Korean repeated, sternly.

Richter looked a little shamefaced, but the cockiness was still there at least superficially. 'That did sound pretty much like the headmaster to me,' he said. Then he looked to Miss Wilkins for encouragement, glad she was there. The slight nod and fleeting crinkling of her eyes reassured him. 'But for sure. I have already decided this. No more hacking No more games.'

'Good to hear Because that's one helluva Helminth you unleashed out there. And a real nice program. I've been studying it. Happily, though, it has a couple of mistakes that should help us out. So . . . Ready to grab a sandwich and go to work upstairs? They insisted we house the task force on the eleventh, by the way. A real propitious floor in this building, apparently. To appease the spirits! Come on, champ. Let's go kill this thing.'

The chairman did not want to alienate him too much, but Richter needed to know that the team of professionals working day and night up there were not exactly members of his fan club. The atmosphere was going to be tense and difficult as the world pressure on them for a quick fix result grew. On the other hand, he would keep a close watch on him for his own reasons. If he proved as good as he seemed, and was serious about no more goofing off, there would certainly be a job for Richter with his company. Genius was always in short supply. Even in Silicon Valley. And the chairman had lost none of his killer opportunist business acumen As a price for his drop-everything leadership of the search for the antidote, and for hand-picking the task force, he had even leveraged agreement that his company would get to own the IPRs, the intellectual property rights Just one reason why he found it hard to get mad at Richter and Miss Wilkins. They might just be responsible for doubling his personal net worth.

When the computer experts had left, Miss Wilkins turned to

Mitchell. She was feeling brittle and fractious after the flight, her body clock on London time. 'Will Sool be coming while I'm here?' she asked.

'Why?'

'Oh, I suppose I'd like to confront him. Face to face.'

'How whacked are you?' he responded. 'Feel up to a spot of sightseeing?'

'You must be joking.'

'You remember Sool told you to see the Japanese exhibition at the Independence Hall? Well, I think we should go there now. It'd earn you a lot of respect when – if – you next get to talk. But we'd have to leave now. It's at Chonan, a town to the south of here. The driver reckons he could make it down there in an hour and a half. The place closes at 5.30. Feel up to it? You can snooze in the car.'

She frowned at him. 'What's the real reason? And what's the hurry? You're going to have to be straight with me if you want my help.'

Mitchell thought for a moment. She was obviously serious, and given the timing of things, he could see no real downside. So be it. 'Very well. I will tell you everything, and hope you'll then give some thought to helping me. Let me explain. As of now, Sool and the whole of SGT are bust. Belly up. Sool punted his entire corporation on derivatives contracts which have just gone spectacularly wrong. This is not known in the market yet. Only one or two of Sool's treasury management people here are aware of some bits of the jigsaw. Sool alone had the whole picture. But I think we'll see some market rumours in the weekend business press, and by Monday it will be everywhere. Panic stations. The biggest corporate collapse since BCCI – maybe bigger. I don't know.'

'And this includes Chiasmus?' She thought of all her friends still there.

'Absolutely. Come Monday, it'll be in receivership.'

Miss Wilkins was now wide awake. 'And nobody knows about this?'

Mitchell shot her an exasperated look. 'Like I just said, no. Nobody knows. Anyhow, what Sool will do now is very, very hard to predict. Will he throw himself at the feet of the Korean government; try and get them to fund a rescue package? I don't think so. And anyway, they've been seriously embarrassed by his very un-Korean behaviour recently. Our Foreign

Office people think they'd let SGT go even if he did plead with them.

'Will he look for one or more "white knight" companies to buy up the valuable bits of SGT, and salvage some kind of face-saving rump? Will he stay here in Korea and face the music? The Koreans have been going through a clean-up period, exorcising a few political and business ghosts.

'My guess is he'll do none of these things. He's too proud. I think he'll already have a contingency plan for exactly this kind of failure. There'll be plenty of company money sitting in some secret account somewhere, and pretty soon now he'll make a run for it. Disappear. Or turn up somewhere we can't reach him. Like Idi Amin, safely "exiled" in Saudi Arabia. That's if someone doesn't kill him first.'

Miss Wilkins was shocked. 'Are you talking about your own people?'

'No. We stopped that kind of thing after SOE and the war. Nobody believes us, but it's true. Not because of the morality arguments, but because it would drag us into much greater political control and interference. Like the CIA What I mean is that I've been warned by the Americans that they suspect one of their agents may be out here. Unauthorised. It's the man whose Japanese wife was kidnapped in L.A. He thinks Sool can have her freed. If he doesn't release her, or if she's found dead, then the man – Trent – may use his combat training in anger. He's apparently a specialist in the East.'

'The West. From Los Angeles, you'd surely call it the West,' she said pedantically. 'And I still don't see why you think I should go to this Japanese exhibition.'

Mitchell was no less tired than she, and becoming no less irritated. He did his best to conceal all this, however, sensing that he was engaged in a kind of fly fishing with her – catching her attention, tempting her, reeling in a little, allowing her a little more line before reeling in again. 'Sool still has one last throw of the dice against the Japanese. He's even boasted about it to someone I've got on the inside with him. If we can stop that, then he really is finished. If we don't, then . . . Well, whatever it is will be bloody. And very dangerous. The Japanese are getting very tired of being cast as the eternal villain of history. If they figure the attack is politically motivated, I wouldn't like to predict their response. So we need to find out what the big secret is, to give me some kind of lead. And

if my instincts are right, we have very little time left. We have two last chances. Both of them weak.

'First, you see this damned exhibition he's so keen on, and then ring him for one of your cosy little confessional chats. Apologise for what you've done to him. Defer. Treat him like a Confucian father figure. Get him talking. Say how moved and angry you were after seeing the exhibition. Attack the Japanese. I don't know . . . Tell him they tortured and killed your father in the war. He did in fact spend time in Singapore and only just got out. Milk it. Raise the emotional stakes. Use your considerable intelligence and cunning. Coax out of him whatever it is. You've just ruined this man. He's emotionally crippled and vulnerable right now. Use it to get him to talk.'

'I'll try again. But I'm not optimistic. I tried last time. And now . . . Well, I doubt he'll even want to talk to me again,' she replied.

'Don't be so sure. Our service shrink has studied your last exchanges. I was given his report in the car from the airport. He thinks that Sool has developed a fairly common kind of displacement relationship with you. You may say you're sorry for what you've done to him, but he feels the original shame over what he did to you. We think he'll take the call.'

'You said there were two chances of finding out the secret.'

'Yes. And this also involves you. Very much so. I've arranged for us to fly over and see Kyung-Wha, Sool's aunt, tomorrow. On the island of Chindo. We'll try and get her to tell us what happened back in August 1995. But this gets a bit, well, mystical. Not my kind of thing at all. But I sent one of our embassy people to call on her this morning, asking if she'd agree to meet me. To talk about big problems for her nephew, Sool Kay-Sheen. The man said it was as though she had been expecting someone. She insisted she would only meet "the venerable and strong foreign woman". And forgive me for this, but Kyung-Wha also went on to describe her as a "woman not known by man". None of my business, of course.' Mitchell looked extremely uncomfortable, not daring to look at her. 'She's apparently a shamanist, and believes in the spirit world. All mumbo-jumbo, of course, but if we could pass you off as this powerful foreign woman, we might get her to open up.'

Miss Wilkins was much thicker-skinned than she seemed, and was quite enjoying Mitchell's old-fashioned male discomfort. 'Which man didn't know her?' she asked, mischievously, pretending not to have understood.

A quick look into her eyes revealed, he thought, a slight twinkle. But he was not brave enough to trust it. He bailed out by diverting his next look to his watch. 'Look. The car's waiting to take us to the exhibition. If we're going, we need to leave now. I can't afford any more time explaining. Are you going to help? Yes or no?'

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'Do you get a badge, or certificate or something for it?' Blake asked with mock seriousness.

'For what?' Jane was eating over-ripe melon, dabbing her wet lips with a napkin.

'For getting smacked in the mouth by Sool. I hear it's now quite a fraternity.'

'He didn't! What happened? What did you do?' Jane was shocked. He hit his Korean people. And he had hit her. Sometimes in anger, other times . . But herself apart, she had never known him strike a foreigner.

'I did probably what for me was the hardest thing of all. Nothing. And before you find a white feather to give me, I'd better bring you up to date on the news. And why – and *listen* to me – why I'm not letting you go back there today. Or ever. The time's come. You have to get out. Today.'

She had tried to interrupt, but he insisted on her letting him finish. When he had she was strangely quiet. What he had recounted did not surprise her. It had been very obvious that something dramatic had

happened that morning, from Sool's mood and the frantic, endless calls he was making. He had barely noticed her leave.

They were lunching at the Hong Kong Yacht Club and the buzz of their relationship was very much still there, for each of them. It was as if they had never been parted.

One of the Globecom women had put her in a cab over to Causeway Bay on the island. Blake had already been there, talking to some friends in the bar – European and Hong Kong Chinese – who were still hanging on to see what the new government would do. It was obvious that he was proud of her, and he showed her off a little, buying another round for the boys before they went through to eat. This had touched her. She realised that behind all the world-weariness he still had boyish enthusiasms. She had feared for a while that they each suffered from the debilitating 'been there, done everything' feeling that had eaten away at so many of her modelling friends. People who seemed to have it all – beauty, money, power. All, that is, except a purpose in life. It was good to see him just drinking beer, hanging out with the guys and goofing off for a while.

As the men had talked boringly about their latest sailing adventures – and given the winds and sudden storms in the area, there was never a shortage of stories – she had gone out on to the long terrace overlooking the typhoon shelter. The bay was busy with dredgers, commercial traffic, very fast police speedboats, an occasional gin palace and – unbelievably – a Mississippi paddle steamer, a tourist-attraction replica. She also watched the planes weaving their way in and out of Kowloon. But most of all she had stared at the Peninsula, picturing Sool there in the suite, still ashen-faced, fighting the biggest fight of his life.

After lunch he suggested a trip up to Victoria Peak. It was a clear, sunny day, warm for late November at twenty-five degrees, although he knew it would be four degrees cooler up there. They needed to talk. Having paid, and popped back to the bar to say goodbye to the guys, he led her to the car park where he had left an office 5 Series BMW four-door sports saloon. He preferred the peak tram to the awkward drive, and headed off to pick up Hennessy Road and Queensway for the terminal off Garden Road in Central. Neither of them saw the hired grey Datsun leave the long, narrow car park behind them. Neither saw Richard Trent as he felt again for the Triad's virtually antique .25 Beretta automatic in his pocket.

They did not see him get on at the rear of the tram for its steep eight-minute ride. Nor as he followed them for their planned forty-minute stroll around the peak, starting from Harlech Road. But they did see the spectacular views, and heard the crickets and birds, they admired the millionaires' houses and paused at a touching open-air Christian service, a small group of smiling young evangelists braving the Chinese. Most of all they saw and explored each other. Holding hands, talking intently – about Sool, themselves and the future.

'You seemed so happy back there with your friends. Just one of the guys. Sometimes, though, you look as though nothing excites or has the ability to shock you any more. What is it the French call it . . . ennui?' She was pleased with herself for remembering the word. Blake was, she felt, well read and on a far higher intellectual level than she. It was partly the cultured European/New World philistine stereotyping, something that can haunt even the most sophisticated Americans. Mainly, though, it was the sheer variety of his conversation, his seemingly endless eclectic range of interests, and the effortlessness of it all.

'I do get a little world-weary, and in the literal sense. But if I suffer from anything, it's not ennui – rather something much worse. Something the ancient Christians first talked of. They called it accidie. The torpor of the sated. A man isn't interested in food after gorging at a banquet. Or sex after he's climaxed. Sometimes my whole life seems that way. As if I've had my fill of it, and there's no point in even getting out of bed.'

'What would you do, if you could get out of PR?' she asked, slightly peeved, feeling corrected.

'Not if, but when. With a little help from Sool's golf money,' he replied. 'I really don't know yet what I want to do. That accidie again. Something a bit less commercial. All I seem to do is sell, sell, sell. Mostly myself. I studied William Blake at university – no relation! And a phrase he used somewhere keeps coming back to me. He talked about "the merchant's thin, sinewy deception . . ." That says it all.'

She looked away, now feeling seriously inadequate. 'Look. Understand this. I don't know your William Blake from Blake Edwards. I never got to college, let alone your precious Cambridge. You once told me that Wagner really gets to you. Well, Phil Collins and Whitney Houston make me cry. You know your wines and

gourmet cuisine, and I'm a Diet Coke and tuna salad queen. You speak . . . how many languages? And I struggle with half they say in English on the goddamn Discovery Channel. We've got squat in common. So tell me, what makes us think you and me could ever work out?'

He was annoyed with himself for his pretentious bit of philosophising and his lack of sensitivity. 'Some things can't be answered with logic. I can't prove to you it'd work. I can only try and show you. And I'm sorry for going on a bit.'

She shrugged. 'And I'm sorry too. I didn't mean to gripe. But when you talk sometimes you dazzle me. You know? And it's not that I don't want to learn from you. I do. I *want* to learn. But I don't want to be lectured.'

'OK I understand. Sorry. No more *Pygmalion*,' he said, but saw her clenching her fists at him, boxing-style. 'OK! OK! No more *My Fair Lady* I mean. No Dr Higgins and Eliza Doolittle.' He did not even dare mention *Educating Rita*, but could not resist adding, 'And anyway, there's less to me than meets the eye . . .'

She play-acted a right hook to his chin. 'Hello. Hello . . .? Anybody home? You still don't get it. Try no more *Pretty Woman*. No more Richard Gere and Julia Roberts. Understand what I'm saying? This is dumb old *me* down here.'

They laughed and hugged. 'If this is our first fight, I think it should wait,' he said, serious again. 'The main thing is for you to agree not to go back. Things are going to get even worse over there as the day and night go on.'

She realised he was right, but felt uncomfortable. Knowing all that she now did about Sool, there was no way she wanted to stay around She had not wanted to come to Hong Kong. But just to vanish, not even to say goodbye, when everything else around him was crashing . . . It smacked too much of rats and sinking ships. And it smacked of cowardice. Also, despite the violent stuff, despite the fear, he had been pretty OK for most of their time together. He had always been there for her when she needed help. He'd been in her corner when no one else had

'OK. I leave him today. But I go back and tell him. Despite what he is, I owe him that much. And I need him to know it really is over. There's no way I want his people searching for me, watching me.' She held her hand up to stop him trying to change her mind. 'I'll go back to the hotel from here, grab a bag and make my peace . . .

Then I'm gone.' Looking directly at him, she went on, 'All yours. If you really want to give this thing a shot.'

They stopped and kissed, passionately, both excited and hopeful, having finally made the commitment.

Trent also stopped and turned to look at the view. Their kiss made him think for the millionth time about Fuji, and the extraordinary love they shared. Anger welled as he thought of her locked away somewhere – he still refused even to think about the other possibility – whilst in front of him and free was the Korean's whore with her latest casual lover. Free and here, on their furtive, tacky assignation, at what was for him a very special place. The Point. A spot he had always promised to take Fuji to some day. A special location from her all time favourite old weepy, *Love is a Many Splendored Thing*.

His face was contorted with anger as he looked forward to seeing fear on the whore's doll-like face when he took her. And he hoped to hell the English guy would be around to put up some resistance. Normally he would barely have recognised himself in the person he was becoming, the sort he usually despised and spent his life trying to convict. His circumstances were barely recognisable, however, and he badly felt the need to hit somebody again. Hard And from what he had seen of Blake, Sool's bag-carrying apologist, the man looked pretty fit and able to look after himself. Similar height and weight. But, as Trent well knew, no match for a trained professional.

'Time we went back,' Blake said. 'If you really insist on it, I'll drop you at the Peninsula. Then you grab a cab, or I can have a car sent, and you meet me at the Foreign Correspondent's Club, back over here. I'll give you the address. First I'm going to my office to update my people as best I can. Then I want to nose around the club and see what if anything is being picked up on this SGT story. I'll book us a room at the Mandarin for tonight, and we'll decide where we go from here over dinner this evening. Sound good?'

Trent had initially cursed as he saw them coming towards him, but his luck held. He clearly heard Blake's words as they passed. And her reply.

'Sounds real good But don't send a car I can get a cab from the lobby.'

Trent grinned into the stiffening breeze. Several possibilities had been presented to him for the snatch. From outside the Peninsula. Arriving at or leaving the FCC. And the Mandarin Hotel, that night

or the next day. Following them at a discreet distance back to the tram, he quickly decided on the first option as being the simplest. He would approach her in the lobby of the Peninsula as she left, claiming to be with a company car sent by Blake after all. Easy. And it entailed the neat irony of being the self-same deception that Sool's people had employed at L.A. International to kidnap Fuji. The difference here was that Trent did not have a secure bolt-hole, and had virtually no time. His plan was brutally simple. He had already set the Nissan's central locking so that the rear child locks were activated. Once she realised something was wrong, she would not be able to open the doors. Sight of the gun should deter her from trying to attract the attention of other drivers or passers-by. Not that the notoriously self-centred and rude citizens of Hong Kong would be at all likely to help even if she was screaming Especially not for a *gweipor*. And it could be Triad business. Or *chi-lo* And either spelt trouble.

Then he needed the fastest roads to some isolated spot where he could hole up in the car for as many hours as it took. Having carefully studied maps and a tourist guide in the hire car, he had decided to drive like a bat out of hell, north up Nathan Road towards the New Territories and Hong Kong's dormitory towns. Precisely where, he neither knew nor cared. Probably first to the outskirts of Tsuen Wan's industrial areas. Then, if he found nowhere safe there, further north to Tai Mo Shan, Hong Kong's highest mountain. A guide had told him he could drive up Route 'Twisk' to a little-used road that ran along the top of the pass. It would be cold up there at night, and he would need blankets and a couple of vacuums of coffee or soup. Once safely alone, he would bind her if necessary and call Dandino on the GSM car phone he had stipulated they include at the rental firm If there was no news of Fuji, he would tell him what he was about to do and ask his help.

Next he would call Sool He had rehearsed his words and the likely responses so many times in his mind that it was now almost comforting, like a catechism. 'Chairman Sool,' he would begin with formal politeness, 'I regret to inform you that your companion Miss Jane Field is in my custody. Acknowledge if you understand what I am saying . . . Good. She is well and you will be permitted to speak to her briefly soon I do not want money, or anything else from you except this. You are to ensure that my wife, Fuji Trent, kidnapped at Los Angeles International Airport, is freed and delivered unharmed

to the police within the next eight hours. This is to be confirmed with Detective Pete Dandino of the Los Angeles Police Department within this time-frame I will give you numbers where he can be reached at any time. He is expecting the call.

'Eight hours is not a negotiable period of time. It's deliberately generous enough to enable you to comply, even if you have any logistical difficulty raising Mr Arnold Beeker and the other associates responsible. You will know that I am a federal agent, acting alone and outside the law. You should also know that, despite my measured tone, I am a desperate man. I love my wife. And I will kill if I have to, to get her back.'

He would listen to whatever Sool said in response, then let Field speak to him briefly. Then he would face a long, worrying night. Field would probably cry the whole time, plead with him and offer herself. Sex for sympathy. A woman like her, an alcoholic, that was all she knew. From what he had seen on Sool's dossier, she would probably even enjoy being tied up first. How stunned she would be to find a man who could resist her beauty. Who found her repulsive.

But as he later watched the BMW drop her off at the Peninsula, he wondered what exactly he would do if his deadline was not met. Could he kill in cold blood? He had always considered himself a caring man, with strong moral convictions. Uncomfortably strong sometimes, for the profession he had chosen. 'Saint Richard' had been his class nickname at the Quantico Academy, and it was not kindly meant. It had even followed him as a First Office Agent after training. Normally the answer to his question, therefore, would be obvious. But Trent had never felt less normal in his life.

Mitchell listened in as she called Sool, a notepad and pen at hand so that he could pass her notes if necessary. It was almost 6 p.m. in Seoul, an hour earlier in Hong Kong, and they were at the red-brick British Embassy in Chung-Dong, just to the north of Toksugung Palace The building dated back to 1890, but had been given a much-needed £4 million refurbishment and expansion in the early 1990s. This had included the newly located state-of-the-art secure cell they were now using. The local MI6 station chief was sitting alongside.

The Sat phone warbled for an agonisingly long time before Sool broke off from packing a large trunk. Only five people had the

jealously guarded number – his senior secretary in Seoul, Park, the MD of SGT Capital, Jane, and now Miss Wilkins. The Atlas was used primarily to initiate calls. If he received any, the caller knew it had to be important or they would face his wrath. 'Sool,' he said.

'This is Miss Wilkins. You said I should call you when I got to Seoul. Is this a good time to talk?'

'No. Not a good time. A very bad time for me.' His voice betrayed the hell he was going through as he desperately took stock of his position.

Mitchell was horrified when she responded, 'I apologise. Perhaps I should call at a better time.' He relaxed as she continued, 'It's only that I've just this minute returned from the exhibition at Konan. As you recommended. The Japanese Hall is extremely well done.'

'Good. Yes. I think so. And now you understand more.'

'Oh, but I didn't need to see the exhibition to understand. I understand Japanese cruelty very well. You see, my father was captured by them in Singapore. We never saw him again ' Mitchell beamed. She had said it with such conviction. With just the right balance of English pluck and filial sadness.

'Oh, really?' Sool replied, his full attention engaged now. And so. You too have a reason to hate the Japanese.'

'I've read all the books about the war in the region. Spoken to veterans. Survivors. And I've visited Singapore and seen the memorials. I know exactly what the Japanese were capable of. And, yes, I detest the whole damned race,' she said, passion rising in her voice now. 'So I too have a very personal reason for my hatred. But what of you? There's a national anti-Japanese feeling, I know. The exhibition shows this. But is there anything more? Did your own family suffer?'

'Good girl,' Mitchell mouthed, as they held their breath.

One of Sool's long silences followed. They could almost hear his mind playing over the decision. Whether or not at last to share his secret with someone. When he finally spoke, his tone seemed positive. 'Miss Wilkins, you have lost your father to the Japanese. I also suffered a great loss. It is something I would like to share with someone. A burden I have carried alone for perhaps too long.' He paused, and Mitchell's pen hovered ready in his shaking hand, even though the conversation was being recorded. 'I will tell you of it. But it is not something for the telephone. How long are you to remain in Seoul?'

She looked to Mitchell for guidance. He put up three fingers. 'Not long. Up to three days. That's all,' she replied, a little thrown.

'I doubt I will be in Seoul over this time, but who knows? Where are you staying? I may call you.'

This time it was the local man who came to their aid. He wrote down the name and number of the close-by Koreana, a hotel the embassy used for middle-ranking visitors. She read it out to Sool, having pretended to search for her check-in card. 'But you have intrigued me now,' she urged him gently, not wanting to seem obvious. 'I've told you about my family tragedy. Can't you share yours with me?'

But they had lost him. Other phones were ringing in the background, and Park was whispering the news that the pilot was fuelled up and ready, having obtained permission to land. 'I regret I must go. We will talk again. But tell me, how is the task force? Will they soon defeat this computer virus, this computer *worm* of yours?'

'My young colleague is working with them right now. They seem hopeful of a breakthrough now they have his source program.'

Sool gave a bitter laugh. 'For me now it is all too late. It's a mess.' Then the line went dead.

Mitchell looked wearily from his man back to Miss Wilkins, shaking his head. 'Time you got some rest,' he said to her. 'We've got an early flight over to Chindo Island. Plan B. His aunt. Hope you don t mind helicopters. And well done, by the way. You handled that just right. I'm glad you're on *our* side now.'

Miss Wilkins never courted praise, and suspected Mitchell rarely offered it She had come to respect his consummate professionalism, however, and his comment pleased her. 'Thank you,' she said, with the first smile of the day. 'And I'll try to be in a better mood tomorrow. We virgins miss our sleep, you know.'

Jane nervously let herself into the suite, half hoping he would not be there so she could leave him a note. What she saw took her aback. Park was dragging a suitcase from Sool's bedroom to place it alongside the three others already neatly lined up by the door. Two of them, she saw, were her own. Then Sool came out, jacketless, wheeling the trunk. 'K–S. What's happening? Where are you going?' she asked. She had expected him to stay until Monday.

Sool was flushed. He looked at her strangely. 'Where are *we* going,' he corrected. 'We!'

'All right, then. We.'

He smiled. 'No shopping? You didn't see anything to buy?'

She cursed herself for not returning with a token bag or two. Disoriented by what was going on, she tried to decide how to break the news that she was leaving him. Above all she had to do it privately. He must not be made to lose face in front of Park. 'Damn, yes I did. I left the bags with the porter's desk while I looked at the shops over in the hotel foyer. Park, do you think you could go down and collect them for me? Opposite reception.'

Park looked at Sool, who nodded. He would not be gone long, and Jane knew she had to be brave and get it over quickly.

Sool looked odd in shirtsleeves. More vulnerable without his business-suit armour. 'K–S. We need to talk,' she said as soon as they were alone.

'Later.' He was heading back to the room to bring out another trunk.

'No. This is important. I need to talk now. Please.' She could hear her voice trembling, and she was beginning to regret her decision to confront him.

He turned and came over to her. 'Look,' he said gently. 'I know I haven't been spending enough time with you. And that I've been angry and grumpy recently. Right? But things will change from now, you'll see. I want to make it up to you.'

'It's not that,' she protested, trying to get the initiative back.

'Then it's the safe, isn't it? You feel bad about that. That's what all this is about. You thought I didn't know you'd helped them. But it was all filmed ' He saw her eyes widen. 'I admit I was mad with you at the time. But now I forgive you. Who were they? Federal agents? Telling you stories about films. Filmed murders?'

She nodded, terrified now.

'They made you help them. I understand that. Saying it was your patriotic duty. Poor young Japanese girls. Poor young Mexican boys. It's all right. I'm not angry with you any more.' His voice was a monotone, flat, hypnotic The evil in the man had almost become a physical presence before her. How had she never sensed it before? Now she could touch it, smell its stinking breath . . .

'And those videos. Did you . . . did you really have them made?' She half closed her eyes, waiting for the answer. If he had, then she knew her own life would be as cheap if it suited him.

'But they were only Japanese! And illegal immigrants. They were only daughters of murderers. Murderers of Koreans. Ha!' He threw his head back and began his terrible silent laughter, his face stretched like a screaming skull.

'K-S, I came, was trying to tell you . . . That I think we should give each other some space.' He suddenly stopped and stared. 'For a while. Just for a while,' she hurriedly added. 'It's not you. Really it's not. But I can feel my old troubles coming back. You know? I need some time on my own. Maybe you do too. Just for a while. I really think it's best.'

She had expected the long silence. The agonising wait while he thought about her meaning, and its effect on him, was all connected with the crucial state of his *kibun*. When the gestation was over he at last looked up. 'Better you come with me,' he said conclusively, as if that was all there was to be said on the subject.

'But you haven't listened to me.' She was annoyed now, her fear taking second place briefly to her anger. 'Don't you see? That's the whole point You never listen. I'm just an asset to you. A decorative business asset. You don't really care about me. You just like having me around. To exhibit like a nice watch, a nice car. Or your new jet. You know it's true. And there are plenty of other girls out there to choose from. Younger than me. Girls who like what you like more than me. Who are better at it. *Really* into it. I know I disappoint you that way.'

'Go to your room!' he shouted, towering over her.

'Go to hell!' she cried. But his open right hand cracked hard across her face, leaving her dazed Grabbing her by the hair, he dragged her across to the bedroom, threw her on the floor and ripped out the phone. Her ears were singing, but she heard the door slam and the key in the lock being turned. 'Let me out, you bastard!' she yelled, and began screaming. Full-blooded screams, one after the other. When at last she opened her eyes again the door was ajar and Park was standing over her.

He watched Sool, waiting for instructions. Sool looked down at

her sadly, and then gave a single sharp nod. Park's hand became a blade as it flashed out, cutting into the side of Jane's pliant neck. She crumpled pathetically, the carotid artery compressed, and the screaming stopped.

Trent was now feeling highly conspicuous. He had been in the lobby of the Peninsula for almost two hours, dodging porters to-ing and fro-ing incessantly with mountainous trolleys of luggage. There had so far been no sight of Jane emerging past reception, from the elevators beyond. He had, however, watched Sool leave alone well over an hour earlier and get into a Rolls-Royce, as if going out for dinner or some social event, not carrying a briefcase or any papers. It was suddenly all going wrong for Trent. Something must have happened. Something had changed. From what he had overheard on the Point, even Blake would have expected her at the FCC back over on the island by now. Finally, in frustration, he went over to a house phone and asked to be put through to Sool's suite. He was rehearsing what to say when she answered but the receptionist completely threw him. 'I'm sorry, sir. Mr Sool checked out an hour or so ago.'

'Then put me through to Miss Field. In the same suite,' he said desperately.

'I'm sorry, sir. That suite is vacated. Mr Sool and all his guests checked out together.'

Trent was wild-eyed, still trying to make sense of it, when he suddenly saw Blake arrive He too was looking worried, and ran across the lobby to the elevators. Minutes later he was back down, talking urgently with a young man on reception. He obviously was not liking what he heard because he thumped his fist down hard on the desk Then, as if suddenly making his mind up, he sprinted back out of the hotel. Trent followed, and saw him getting in the BMW which somehow he had managed to leave in the Peninsula's driveway. Trent had tried to do likewise earlier but hotel staff quickly and very firmly moved him on, leaving the Nissan now hopelessly marooned a block away. He dug into his hip pocket and, without checking their value, pushed a wad of notes into the face of a startled cab driver. 'Stay with that BMW and I double this. Now move!' he said, getting in.

The heavy traffic made it the biggest and easiest airport fare the grinning driver had ever made. A week's wages. When he had been

dropped off, it was Trent who now had no parking problems. He stayed in the shadows as Blake ran through the concourse to the first check-in desk he saw. He seemed to get the information he wanted and walked despondently back to the exit and the BMW in the car park.

Trent made up his mind. The plan, now, was that there was no plan.

'Do not make any sound. Get into the car slowly. Yes, this is a gun at your head. And yes, I would use it. Nod once if you understand.' Blake had just zapped the alarm, unlocking all the doors, when the calm, clear authoritative voice from behind had startled him – startled him even more than the cold steel pressing into his right temple.

'Take it My wallet and cards are in my inside pocket. And take the Rolex. Take it all.' Blake had been mugged three times before in different parts of the world and now saw himself as a veteran.

'I said just nod your head, asshole. Don't mess with me! You hear?' With that Trent pistol-whipped Blake on each side of the head, drawing blood Briefly dazed, Blake nodded slowly and deliberately, belatedly realising that this was no ordinary mugger. 'Good. That's better, Blake,' Trent went on, deliberately using his name to get the jerk off the how-to-handle a-mugger override. 'Now pass me the keys and get in the car Slowly and quietly. Do it.'

'American? Knows my name? Interesting,' Blake said bravely, getting in.

Trent sat in the rear passenger seat immediately behind Blake. The parking area was dark, and for the moment at least deserted. An incoming flight could change all that, however, and Trent was anxious to make some kind of progress. 'Where'd they go? Sool and Field. Where'd they go?' he demanded.

'Who the hell are you?' Blake asked, starting to turn around. A single whip with the Beretta quickly had him facing forward again.

'I can sit here and hit you all night. It's your call.'

'What is it you want from me?'

'Well, it ain't your watch, Blake Try your whore Miss Supermodel Whore Jane Field. That's who I want. Where is she?'

Blake was trying to make some sense of it all. 'What are

you? Some sad pervert stalker?' He cringed, expecting to be hit again.

'Where *is* she!'

'I don't know! Why do you think I'm here? I'm trying to find her. She was supposed to meet me two hours ago, and didn't show. I tried Sool's suite and found they'd checked out. That's why I came to the airport. Sool has his own jet, and I was trying to head them off. Or at least find out if he'd flown out somewhere.'

'And has he?'

'His jet left for Korea. *North* Korea. Twenty minutes ago.'

'And the woman?'

'"The woman", that woman, is someone special to me. And I don't know where the hell she is,' Blake replied, angry now. He was considering trying to lever the gun arm away. 'What's your interest in her anyway? And who *are* you?'

Trent began to relax slightly. 'My interest is in getting my wife back alive. From Sool. And one way I figured to do that was to take his woman, and make an exchange.'

Blake also relaxed slightly. Trawling his memory for what Mitchell had told him, he tried to come up with the name. 'I know you,' he said. 'You're the FBI man. Tennent. And Sool had your Japanese wife kidnapped. In Los Angeles.'

'How the hell . . .? Are you some kind of enforcement officer too?'

'I'm helping out. That's all. Amateur night, maybe. But we're both on the same side here, Tennent,' Blake said irritably.

'Trent. It's Trent. And you say you're working against Sool too? For the British?'

'You know something, *Trent*. Strange as it may seem, I talk better without a gun at my head. Why don't you put that thing away while we go somewhere and compare notes? It seems to me we're both looking for our women. Trying to find out what's happened to them. Trying to get them back. And as I see it, all roads lead to Sool. The *only* road leads to Sool. And we have very little time. Maybe we should pool our resources and go after the bastard together. What do you say?'

Trent moved the Beretta gingerly, afraid the museum piece might blow up in his own face. He got out of the car and opened Blake's door, unimpressed by what he saw. 'I hope you fight as well as you talk, Blake,' he said. 'Because you and me against

the world don't sound like great odds. Not from where I'm looking.'

'Maybe,' said Blake grimly. 'But we're in the last chance saloon, "partner". And only we two can stop him now.'

22

'I think only we two can stop him now!' Mitchell called out, over the din of the helicopter.

Miss Wilkins pretended not to hear, and kept her eyes fixed on her lap. She had never much liked small planes. Now she knew she actively disliked helicopters. The nearest domestic flight to Chindo was through Kwangju, the capital of the province Chollanam-do, but that would still have left a two-and-a-half-hour drive to the island. Mitchell's station chief had therefore used his close relations with his counterpart in the Republic's military intelligence service to secure an army helicopter and pilot. A car had collected her from the hotel for the journey of just a few hundred yards, from the junction of Sejongno and Yulgongo to the modern, anonymous-looking government building opposite the National Museum. They drove past the security troops on the gate, and into the heavily guarded grounds. Mitchell had already been there to meet her. Then within minutes they had boarded the Bell Jetranger III five-seater parked behind the building. Travelling with them, sitting alongside the pilot, was a tough-looking

Korean whom Mitchell described as an interpreter, in case one was needed.

The pilot turned to check they were secure behind him 'No photographs,' he said. 'Understand?' After Mitchell reassured him that they did, he completed his pre-flight checks, started the Allison engine, the turbine noisily sibilating, and, after a glance at his gauges – exhaust gas temperature, oil pressure, torque, electrics – increased the power to lift off.

'I can see you don't enjoy this But there are things I must tell you which might help. With winning over Sool's aunt, that is,' Mitchell persisted later as they flew south, the vast Toksan Provincial Park more than a thousand feet below them.

'Very well. Anything to take my mind off all of this,' she replied miserably.

'Good. Well, one of her great interests, apparently, is calligraphy. The ancient Chinese art of writing, using special brushes, inks and paper. It's meant to reflect harmony. I can't see it myself, but there you are,' he said gruffly.

Miss Wilkins smiled to herself at this latest window on Mitchell's endearing Little England barbarianism. 'There's a cultural moat around you, you know.'

'There's nothing they can teach us our own monastic scribes didn't know,' he protested. 'The Book of Kells and all that. Anyway, the Korean calligraphers use the *hangul* phonetic alphabet, not the Chinese *hanja*. It's the kind of thing you might ask about. The other thing for you to understand is shamanism. It's not really a religion. There are no churches, no bibles. But they do have priests after a fashion Almost always women. They act as go-betweens with the spirit world. *Mudangs*, they are called. There are over a hundred thousand of them officially registered here. The main rituals are known as *kuts*. What about all this? Do *you* believe in all this spirit world stuff?'

Miss Wilkins had in fact been going to a remarkable spiritualist in Blackheath once a year since her father's death. But there was no way she was going to admit that to a cynic like Mitchell. 'I believe in an afterlife, if that's what you mean.'

'Well, I can't say I've ever gone in for these Other World things. Although some people in my game think there's something in it. The Americans looked into all kinds of things. At Stanford Research Institute. Remote viewing. ESP Psycho-kinesis. And astrology. In

fact that's how we got Hess to fly to Scotland in 1941. With doctored astrological advice. And the occult. There's a lot about all that which still hasn't been made public. Anyhow, it seems that Kyung-Wha might actually have her *mudang* along this morning. To convene with some spirit or other once she's listened to what we – you – have to ask her.'

'And what exactly *am* I to ask?'

'In your own words, which will be better than mine, you simply have to explain how Sool changed since her visit back in August '95. From a respected *chaebol* leader to a bankrupt. And criminal. A murderer of young girls. A kidnapper. There's no easy way to say these things. And she won't want to confront it all. But what she *must* understand is that Sool has also planned some big terrorist attack on Japan. Stress we don't know what, when or where. And we can only prevent it if she tells us what she said to him that day.'

'And if she refuses?'

Mitchell had never been optimistic about this trip, and all along fully expected that Kyung-Wha would try to take the secret to her grave. If she did refuse, then the Korean Security Service officer in the front had orders to fly her back to Seoul to face their own brand of interrogation. This was information Miss Wilkins did not yet need to know, however. 'If she decides not to talk,' Mitchell replied, seemingly cheerfully, 'then we simply all go home and wait to see the carnage on TV. There's nothing more I can do. This is my last shot.'

The Chinese had been polite, but firm. A delegation of three had gone to Sool's suite at the Peninsula at precisely two that afternoon. After embarrassed, oblique, ritualistic posturing, they had finally got round to telling him what he already knew. In the light of the controversy surrounding SGT and the computer worm, the People's Republic had decided to 'defer' announcing the decision on the car contract. For how long? It is not known. Very sorry.

Sool had been considering his strategy ever since late morning when they had called to make the appointment. His back was to the wall. Come Monday the world would know that SGT had gone down, and the wolves would be on him. Seoul, the States, Europe . . . he would be horribly exposed in all these places. Even the Chinese would not want him now. Yet China was the only card he had left to play. Any hint that they were aware and participating in what Sool

had attempted to do would seriously embarrass the Politburo and cause world outrage, possibly UN censure and calls for sanctions. Few would believe Beijing that it was not officially authorised, simply the illegal actions of a capitalist Korean corrupting a small number of officials.

So he did have some leverage on them. If he attempted to be greedy, however, he had little doubt that they would respond with trumped-up spying or corruption charges. With the inevitable penalty. On the other hand, if he requested some small favour within their gift and influence, then he felt they would co-operate rather than risk a whole lot of trouble they could avoid.

His small price for silence was a call on China's special relationship with its neighbour North Korea. He wanted unofficial asylum, along with a modest place there. In the closed Hermit Kingdom he would be safe from the wolves. Indeed, his imminent 'spectacular', Dzerzhinsky's bombing attack in Tokyo, might even make him a hero with people whose hatred of the Japanese was even more virulent than that in the South.

The hugely relieved Chinese had agreed with alacrity, making hurried calls there and then from his room. They would try, they promised. When the officials had gone, he had told his pilot to submit a flight plan to the capital, Pyongyang, and to stand by for permission. He expected to get confirmation within a few hours.

Sool's recapitulation of his extraordinary day was suddenly interrupted. 'We're starting our descent, sir,' the pilot said, relief in his voice. It was proving a strange day for him too. They had made the Hong Kong–Seoul flight many times, but he had never before flown into the North From anywhere. He had also been permitted to overfly the Yellow Sea for the first time on a China–Korea route. The Chinese have long claimed the Yellow, or Western, Sea as their own, refusing aviation rights on, for example, Seoul–Beijing routes. For years pilots had to avoid the area by routing way down to Shanghai, and then banking sharply north over the East China Sea.

Looking down at the great unknown city below, Sool wondered what it held for him. Before putting on his seat belt he glanced across the aisle at Jane's body, strapped rigidly in by the special restraining shoulder harness. Her head lolled rhythmically forward, mouth open, the beautiful face part hidden by the soft honey-blonde hair. He looked again at the black straps biting into her shoulders, bruising them, thrusting out her breasts. Breathing more heavily, he

knew now he could not possibly have left her. With time to kill, he was going to need an outlet in Pyongyang for his special tastes.

The Chinese had arranged it earlier with Kai Tak for him to be driven directly planeside, government VIP-style. Jane followed soon after, put on with the luggage, unconscious and unseen by any prying Western eyes, in the 'body bag' cover for her ankle length mink. Since take-off, the capsules of Valium washed down her throat with vodka had kept her barely conscious for the four-hour flight. Leaning across, he slapped her face. 'Wake up, Jane. Time to wake now.'

Her eyes opened and she tried to focus. The cocktail of drugs, alcohol and extreme disorientation made her feel nauseous. Where was she? New York? Hong Kong? And what was she doing? Blake? Oh no! Late. She was late to meet him. But why? She'd known it was important to see him. Was it the old problem? Let it not be that, drinking again Yet she could taste Stolly's lips on hers again. Blacking out. Gaps, great yawning gaps in her memory. Not sure where she was, and with whom. What they had done to her? Horrible. Horrible!

'Jane!' The slap was harder this time and she finally took in Sool peering at her, his garlic breath once more in her face.

'K-S. Where are we? Have I been drinking? I can't remember things.'

He adopted a concerned look. 'Yes. Yes. You got drunk. Like the old days I found you. An empty bottle of vodka ' He was pleased with her confused logic. It would help.

'But I'm sore. My neck hurts. And all this is too *tight*.' She was near to petulant, bitter tears. Lost memories. Drinking. How hard she had tried to leave all that behind her. It had been *so* hard, for so long And here she was Letting everyone down again. Waking up lost, without bearings and alone. She stared uncomprehendingly at him before falling back into a light, troubled sleep.

The lights of Sunan International Airport were drawing them down from the night. Sool grinned, his face pressed to the window. His little plan had been an inspiration, and was already working. How to keep her controlled and subservient again? He had got her back on the bottle. He could see now that helping to dry her out had been a big mistake. She had become assertive, typically Western, brash. He liked the old Jane better – like this. Pliant, passive, suggestible and obedient.

* * *

The 9 a.m. Korean Air flight was the earliest available the next morning. They felt tired and rough. From the airport, they had ended up drinking hard at the FCC. Shooting pool until one, and finishing off in the main bar until it closed at 2 a.m., each needing to wind down, and loosen up. Blake had kept an eye all night on the wire-service printouts at the entrance to the bar, and had chewed the fat with some journalists he knew. No one yet seemed to have anything buzzing about Sool or SGT. Even cancellation of the next day's press conference had aroused no interest. Over the beers and bourbons they had definitely decided that pooling knowledge and going after Sool was the only hope of finding and freeing Jane and Fuji. As men can, they had quickly become firm barroom friends, bonded by the same goal and mellowed by the alcohol.

Early in the evening Blake had spotted an old China hand, now a rheumy English stringer, in the club. His beloved Bombay Sapphire had finally got the upper hand in his life, and being a stringer had become for him, as for not a few others, the equivalent of an actor 'resting'. Blake bought him a drink and asked how they could rapidly get into North Korea. Rapidly like tomorrow.

'Dear boy, I can't think *why* you'd want to,' he had said. 'But Macau's your best bet. The North Korean visa office. Visas are much quicker if you sign on for a group tour. Fill in the application – *don't* say you're a journo, of course – and they'll even fax it off for approval there and then. Pay your fee – fifteen US dollars last time I did it – give them three photographs, and you're on your way to accordion-band heaven.'

'And that's it? We could do that tomorrow morning and be on our way?' Trent was amazed. 'It's that easy even with a US passport?'

He tapped his empty gin glass meaningfully until Blake nodded again at the barman. 'Not really that easy, old thing. For a start you next have to book your flight to Pyongyang. But from Beijing. You do this at the China Travel Service at the Beijing International Hotel. Then you have to call Macau and give them the confirmed details, so they can have your official guide waiting for you in the DPRK. And there are still endless opportunities for delays. Also, flights are not that regular. I think Air China goes once a week, and Koryo Air twice.' He looked at them sharply. Like most lushes, he was no fool. 'And look, I don't know why you're asking me all this, and why you really want to go. Nor do I want to. But take it from me, it's not

a country to mess with. Don't even *think* about slipping off from the tour guides and nosing around, like you would anywhere else. Everyone is watching, and reports everything. If they didn't they and their families would be in big trouble. Forget all about any of that kind of thing. If you want my tip do like me. I spend most of my time in the billiards room of the Koryo Hotel. Second floor. You generally get a few Third World embassy people and hacks hanging out there It's the best place to pick up on any stories doing the rounds.'

That had decided it. Following Sool to Pyongyang was going to entail far too much time, and would almost certainly end up in arrest, helping nobody. As the drinks began to flow, only one wisp of a plan suggested itself The only other line to Sool was Park. Over the last weeks, Blake had become increasingly aware of just how much Sool relied on him. Trent agreed, knowing that Park even had access to Sool s Trump Tower safe. Find Park and they had real access to Sool.

The use of portable phones is strictly taboo in the club, so Blake had to make the first call from the ground-floor lobby. He had Park's sat-phone number, having used it many times before But maddeningly it was switched off. It was 8.20 and three calls later before at last Park answered. He had caught the last flight out of Hong Kong for Seoul and was in a taxi leaving the airport when he remembered to switch the phone back on.

'CH, is that you?'

'Who is this?' Park sounded guarded.

'John Blake. How's it going?' Blake was trying to sound normal, one of the hardest things to do consciously.

'Pretty well all bad. It's a mess. What do you want?'

'We've just been sent a holding statement the Chinese want to have ready. They've requested our comments,' he lied 'I can't raise Chairman Sool. He's checked out already. I need to fax it over What's going on? Where are you?'

'Read it out.'

'It's twelve pages long! You know how they are. And it needs careful study I've just spoken to their information officer to get the background to it all, and it's not good news There's been a sudden change of mood The top leadership seem to have found out what you and Sool were doing How you were using them to massage the markets. That your low tender price was being achieved illegally.

They know some junior officials had accepted bribes from Sool. They've made a number of arrests, and they might turn on you and Sool to pre-empt any international criticism flying their way. They've got some confessions already.' Blake was improvising as he went. Trent stood and listened, in some awe. The man was a genius with words, utterly convincing.

'How? What are they saying?' The shock in CH's voice encouraged Blake to ladle it on.

'What do you think? Surprise, surprise – the officials are swearing everything was Sool's idea. And they're naming you too. For attempting to corrupt citizens of the People's Republic. The good news is that none of this is in the holding statement. They don't want this publicised any more than we do. They just want something fairly anodyne ready. To pre-empt any flak coming their way on Monday. Just in case something leaks out. You really should read it. And co-operate. Where do I send it?'

There was a pause. 'Will it keep until tomorrow? If so, send it to my office.'

'So you're in Seoul?'

Another pause. 'Yes. But given what's going to happen in the markets on Monday, I'm not going in to SGT again. Or to my apartment. I'm going to lie low for a while. Don't ask me where. I'll have the fax collected and call you.'

Now it was Blake who paused. He was furiously trying to calculate timings. He guessed that the first flight the next morning would not get them to downtown Seoul much before 2 p.m. Traffic willing. 'Look. I'll tell you what we do. Let me play with the draft myself, first thing. I already know there are plenty of things in it we'll need to change. I'll get a first revised draft back to them late morning, and if they're happy with that, send it to you for final clearance later. Let's say hopefully by two . . . or better, three. So long as they have it cleared by the end of play tomorrow. And three in Seoul is two o'clock here in Hong Kong. And Beijing.'

'OK. Thank you, John. I'll have it collected at three.'

'Fine. I'll call your office and make sure the envelope is downstairs with reception, waiting for collection,' Blake concluded, giving a thumbs-up sign to Trent. Then he decided to push his luck still further. He could not stand the uncertainty. 'Where the hell *is* Chairman Sool anyway?'

'He has decided to rest. Monday is his birthday. Ironic, isn't it? So he's having a little holiday. Getting away for a while.'

'I can't blame him for that! But where to? Is he with Miss Field on a beach somewhere? What?'

'Where they have gone is a secret Sorry. You understand Goodbye.'

Where 'they' have gone. *They*. So at least now he knew she was with him. That was something.

After a lousy, brief sleep on the flight the seat-belt sign pinged on, and the stewardess was announcing their descent to Kimpo International. Blake looked at the dark green carpets of forests around the city below him, forests where tigers used to roam. At the sandy playing fields, the river with its canals branching off with wide grass banks, and then at the jumble of toy like parked planes littering the airport – sky-blue Korean Air, grey Asianas . . . The light had a pinky hue. Shepherd's warning, he wondered? Slipping off the Rolex, he unscrewed the winder and moved the hand an hour forward. The red GMT hour hand was unaffected, and as ever reminded him of home. it read 0510 on the twenty-four hour bezel *Farming Today* would begin in an hour on the BBC, followed by the *Today* programme, his usual first news fix of the day . .

'At least we're on time,' Trent said, interrupting his thoughts. 'We should touch down at 1315 on the button. Will renting a car take long?'

'I don't know. I've always been met. I've got my international driving permit, so let's hope not. If it does look like taking an age, we'll have to give up and get a cab Maybe a bullet taxi if we see one.' These were unmetred cabs for long term hire, 'bullet' referring to the breakneck speed of the drivers Blake took out an envelope, padded with blank paper. It was marked 'Urgent. To be collected for Park Chang Hyun'. While Trent had snoozed earlier, he had asked a stewardess to copy out the message in Korean, above his own writing. 'I don't want anything left to chance. If we lose whoever collects this, we've lost Park. And I'm all out of ideas.'

23

Sool Kyung-Wha welcomed them to her home: a white-painted stone house with a pink-tiled roof and walled courtyard, the simple furniture placed *feng shui*-style to use the geomantic *pungsu* art of positive energies. It had been a fifteen-minute uphill hike from where the helicopter had set down, but this was forgotten as they enjoyed the spectacular views to the misty Yellow Sea and the odd shapes of surrounding islands and volcanic mountain plugs.

There are over three thousand islands off the Korean coastline, and not for nothing is Chindo known as the Jewel. A suspension bridge now connects it to the mainland, but the proud island mentality has been maintained. For many centuries officials who had lost patronage in Seoul were banished here, enriching the locals with their sophistication and knowledge, helping make Chindo a centre of artistic excellence – music, screen-making, painting and calligraphy. But overlaying it all is the elemental strangeness found everywhere – the dramatic rise and fall of the tides, among the strongest in the world; the *kanjuyuk* phenomenon, dubbed the 'Moses Miracle', where in early March another island to

the south-east can be reached at low tide by walking a mile and a half 'on' water, the wise-eyed Chindo dog, a breed unique to the island . . . Miss Wilkins knew immediately why shamanism flourished in such a place.

After the courtesy of ginseng tea, the Korean officer began the delicate process of getting to the point of their visit, translating as he went. Throughout Kyung-Wha had discreetly watched Miss Wilkins, virtually ignoring the men. She was not dressed traditionally – the plain knitted top and skirt could have been found in any separates shop in England. Her uncut greyed hair was pinned back, and with her smooth complexion and inherent elegance, she was an imposing woman. 'I would speak alone please,' she said presently, her English, slow and heavily accented, surprising them. It was clear that by alone she meant with Miss Wilkins.

The men left, reluctantly, for the courtyard, where the Korean immediately lit a cigarette.

Alone now, Kyung-Wha continued, 'This is about my nephew. I was told yesterday. Explain please.' She smiled slightly, enigmatically – an expression that was barely to change throughout the visit.

'Thank you for seeing me,' Miss Wilkins began. 'I know only a little about Korean culture Forgive me But I do know that it is impolite to break the harmony and happiness of another person or their home. Yet that is what I have to do today. How would Koreans proceed?'

'Chindo has Western tourists. I have observed them over many years So I know a little of *your* culture. It is better for you to speak as a Westerner to me. I have been preparing myself since yesterday.'

'You are being kind. And I will speak briefly and directly,' Miss Wilkins replied, relieved 'It is about Sool Kay-Sheen. I'm sorry. But he has become a very bad man. You need not know the details, but he has paid for the murders of many young Japanese girls. Another Japanese woman is still missing. Her life threatened.' Kyung-Wha's fixed expression of polite interest did not change but, seeing the pain in her dark eyes, Miss Wilkins paused.

'Please to go on,' Kyung Wha said after a silence of a half-minute or so.

'It is also believed that he has some new murderous action planned against the Japanese. We do not know what. But we

think it will happen any day now. And finally, I have to tell you that he is disgraced in business. His great corporation is now a failure and about to crash. On Monday.' Miss Wilkins lowered her eyes. In front of this woman she felt ashamed for the first time of her part in the collapse, of what she herself had done. She needed to confess, and she craved forgiveness. 'For this last tragedy, I am the one responsible. Me and the sin of pride,' she ended, her voice small.

Kyung-Wha had understood only about half the English, but it was enough 'Monday is his birthday. He was born 4328,' she said. The Korean lunar calendar begins in 2333 BC. Dates were important to how she viewed things. 'Year of the Rooster. Bad for him. Very bad.'

Very bad for everyone, Kyung-Wha thought to herself Her *mudang* had of course been right two years ago. Devils *had* been released from the lower world. The Grave Song luring innocents to their deaths The lack of harmony breaking even the mighty SGT corporation. If anyone was responsible, she felt, it was she. The journey to Seoul, meeting Sool Kay-Sheen, had been sanctioned, but the decision to pass on the letter, to honour her sister's last wish, had been hers alone.

There was a silence of many minutes now, as each reflected on the situation. 'What is asked of me?' Kyung-Wha said at last, showing no outward emotion.

'I want you to tell us what happened At your meeting with your nephew.'

'It is a difficult thing you ask of me. I will need guidance.'

'From whom?'

Kyung-Wha's expression still did not change. 'From his long-dead mother.'

An hour later the altar had been set and the *kosa* began. Miss Wilkins had asked if she might remain in the room to observe, and the *mudang* – a surprisingly coarse woman – readily agreed. Before beginning, and speaking only in Korean, she told Kyung-Wha that she had encountered this foreigner before. The woman never known by a man. The strong and venerable foreigner she had foreseen. The one who could defeat the devils released. But now, in her presence, she had seen something new. Miss Wilkins, she explained, also had a strong but undeveloped inherited spiritual enshrinement. Kyung-Wha was unsurprised by any of this, but

translated for Miss Wilkins only the *mudang*'s assent to her remaining.

There are three main shaman ceremonies. For minor sickness, or prior to beginning a journey, there may be a *pison* at which the *mudang* offers food and prayers. Bigger, more communal ceremonies, perhaps held regularly for the sake of the harmony of the village, are known as *kuts*, and are made up of twelve *kori* procedures. The *kosa*, however, is for those troubled with serious problems. Here, the *mudang* will be expected to take earthly messages to spirits as an intermediary, using dance and song.

The *mudang* had arrived with three musicians, needed to ensure the attention of the shy, sad spirit she had to raise. There was a drummer, a cymbalist and a piper. The drum, a kind of small version of a military marching bass, is central to the ceremony Played sitting on the floor, the drummer rhythmically begins beating each side alternately The priestess's ecstasy is induced as she journeys on the sound of the drum to the spirit world Dressed in plain white traditional dress, her black, oiled hair parted in the middle, she began quietly enough, praying, rubbing her palms together Progressively, however, the incipient trance was evident as some kind of climax approached. Playing unpainted steel bells, bunched like grapes and held in a red piece of silk, she was soon jumping up and down and singing, the piper wailing strange tuneless music. Her monotonous, slow vibrato voice reminded Miss Wilkins in some ways of Portuguese *fado*. She noticed for the first time that the *mudang* had an extra small finger on her right hand, and it repulsed her with a violence she could not explain.

As the ecstasy began, the woman's face looked pained. She was sweating now, leaping and thrusting the bells towards the heavens, arching her back. Strands of hair had escaped and were sticking to her brow and cheeks. Then she began talking and shouting raucously, and Miss Wilkins saw Kyung Wha suddenly stiffen. The *mudang*'s sentences often seemed to end in a questioning lilt Suddenly there was a changed atmosphere, a cold static pricking at the skin. Something was happening in the room and, although not understanding a syllable of what was being said, Miss Wilkins knew that another presence had joined them. A shy, sad presence.

When it was over Kyung-Wha, looking tired, drew Miss Wilkins into another room as the *mudang* and the musicians prepared to leave. There was now a trace of emotion in her voice, but still none

betrayed on her face. 'I have permission to tell you of the Grave Song. You only. You have enshrinement.'

'But if you tell me, I must tell others,' Miss Wilkins responded, not understanding.

'I will tell you. Only you.'

Then she did understand. Kyung-Wha, maybe even the spirit of her brother's wife, did not want the responsibility of exposing the secret. By telling Miss Wilkins, who they believed also had a spiritual spectre, they could avoid confronting the issue. If she told others, it was not their doing. 'I understand,' she confirmed, and sharpened her mind. Mitchell would want to have every detail, every last nuance from her later. Sitting forward, she began to listen. Not speaking, not questioning, not interrupting. Then, when it was over, when she knew, there *were* no comments to be made, nothing anyone with any sensitivity could say. Until the revelation, trying to understand Sool had been like staring at a 3-D image, seeing only the meaningless shapes, repetitions and colours on the page. Armed with the new focus, however, the jumble had instantly regrouped, and a startlingly clear picture leapt out. *So* clear. So obvious now . . .

She could not wait to tell Mitchell, still grumpily sitting with the chain-smoking officer in the tiny sheltered courtyard. But before she left, she pressed Kyung-Wha for one more thing. It was, she knew, a lot to ask on top of everything else. 'But I think Sool Joon-Hee's spirit would wish it,' she had pressed

Kyung Wha immediately agreed, startled to hear Miss Wilkins refer to her sister-in-law by name. Neither she, nor the *mudang* in the ceremony, had used it once. Naming had not been necessary, both parties knowing in advance with whom contact would be made. Mitchell, nor anyone else had ever referred to it. The incident simply confirmed to her what the *mudang* had said. the foreign, venerable woman did indeed have enshrinement.

Miss Wilkins herself did not notice what she had said, and so would never question how she could possibly have known the spirit's name. In her imagination a clear image of a young mother's face had formed from more than half a century earlier, but she was never to know its accuracy. She did leave, however, with an immense feeling of inner peace, harmony and even Christian absolution.

She barely spoke on the walk back down to the helicopter,

Mitchell wanting to hear her news privately, out of earshot of the Korean. The bored pilot lifted off at last with relief, and swung the machine's nose north for home.

'Well?' demanded Mitchell over the din of the rotor blades, his face close to hers.

'It's a terrible story,' she called back. 'His mother was a comfort woman. His father one of any number of Japanese officers. You're certainly right to be worried about this Tokyo thing. He's been through hell. The man's capable of anything.'

Mitchell mouthed some private expletive. 'Anything else? Anything else at all – on Tokyo?'

'Yes. Maybe. Monday's important. It could be on Monday. His birthday's Monday. And Koreans seem big on anniversaries.'

'I can't believe you *did* this to me!' Jane screamed.

Sool stormed about the small room like a caged animal. 'It's not for long. A few months. No more. I'll pick my time, then we can go somewhere else.' He had long ago siphoned off over US$10 million of company money, most of it through his European operations and into Liechtenstein. His plan was to use the Hermit Kingdom as a bolt-hole for as long as it took to get him off the front pages. Soon there would be other stories, other outrages, financial collapses, famines and brutal wars to relegate him to the status of yesterday's villain. Then it would be a little easier to get on with whatever he decided to do next in his extraordinary life.

'But why take me? You don't need me. You don't really even *know* me. I had a *life*!'

'I *know* you I know you were nothing when we met. A vodka-soaked wreck. Your career finished.' Sool took her by the shoulders and shook her. His hand came up and he hit her again. Her lips were swollen and her cheekbones bruised from earlier blows.

'Don't. Don't . . . No more,' she wept, despising herself.

It was noon on Friday, and Sool had so far not even left the apartment to get his bearings. They had been met at Sunan International the night before by a male state guide, and then driven into Pyongyang. The guide had not seemed very senior, more the kind that might be expected to accompany a tourist bus than to greet a leading world business figure. He took them to the oddly carless city centre, virtually the only other vehicles being

the red trams, coaches and the troop carriers. North Korea, which has the world's fifth-largest army, is a country where the military seem to permeate all aspects of life. The plain, utilitarian worker's high-rise apartment was in the Kwangbok suburb, alongside the barely used thirteen-lane highway to the city centre over two miles away. The entrance hall reeked of stale cabbage, and their trunks had virtually filled the sitting room. There was one bedroom with a small double bed, a picture of the 'Dear Leader' above, and another, broom-cupboard-size, with what looked like a child's single bed.

Sool's foul temper resulted largely from all this. It was clear from the flat, and the calibre of the guide, that the Chinese had not made any great effort for him. They had got him in, but seemingly with no more special status than an average tourist. This was not the kind of VIP reception he had expected, given China's importance to the North. It all made him very uneasy. He was exposed, and knew it. Suddenly North Korea seemed like a big mistake.

The single loud knock at the door startled him, and he made Jane go into the bedroom. Flattening his hair and generally straightening himself, he opened up to a man of medium height in a cheap-looking light grey suit. Without waiting to be asked, the man walked in and left Sool to close the door.

'What are you doing here, Sool Kay-Sheen?' he asked, the supreme confidence in his voice that of someone holding all the cards.

'To whom am I talking?' Sool asked, hoping for a card, or some description of who the man was.

'You will not answer questions with questions,' the man said sharply. 'I am an official with the administration. That is all you need to know. So. Again. Why are you here?'

'To rest. To holiday,' Sool replied, cautiously.

'Pah! We know you. A fawning servant of American capitalist aggressors. A slavish imitator of *their* imitators – the Japanese puppet stooges,' he spat. 'Why are you here? To spy? To try to undermine our Dear Leader? To pollute the minds of our people? Speak!'

Sool was in unknown waters. He knew that this kind of anti-Western sloganising was normal parlance in the North. But how could anyone respond to it? Was there any chance of a two-way dialogue with someone talking at you in poster language? He thought not, and again decided to respond with courtesy and

caution. 'I am here to learn about your country. To rest and enjoy the achievements of the Great Leader. And your Dear Leader.'

The man sneered. 'It is like this. Much has happened overnight. Our fraternal friends, the People's Republic, have informed us that they have this morning arrested the criminal dogs who you were bribing. To save their cowards' skins, they have immediately confessed their unauthorised, dishonourable actions. Beijing is angry at you. When they asked us yesterday to permit your visit, they did not know of your crimes. Misled by thieves and vermin Punishments will be severe on the lackeys you bribed.'

Sool was frightened now. This was extremely serious. 'I requested to visit briefly for a vacation. A short stay only. I will leave if there has been a misunderstanding.'

His judgment of the Chinese reaction had been accurate, however. Despite the retribution they were about to mete out to the corrupt officials who gave him the Kuruma and other tender documents, the leadership had no desire to see Sool talking openly about the deal he almost pulled off. International mud sticks, especially with the West always anxious to present everything in the worst possible light for China. As a result they had simply asked North Korea to expel him quietly over the weekend, believing that if it became known that he was exiled in the North, it would add credibility to any stories circulating about official connivance on the corrupt car deal. 'It is clear what will happen. Your plane is still here. It is being held. You can enjoy your "vacation" in our country until Sunday. Then you leave. Or before, even better. No fuss. Understand?'

'I understand.'

'Good,' the man said, and went to the door. A uniformed guard was now stationed outside, his 7.62 model 68 assault rifle at his side Turning to go, the official added, 'And, Sool Kay-Sheen You are a very lucky man. Very lucky.'

Hiring the car at the airport had been straightforward enough. Car rental is not popular in South Korea, and only one rental company operates there, Hertz. As a result there had been no queues or delay getting to their Hyundai Lantra and they made central Seoul and SGT headquarters with time to kill. Blake had dropped off the distinctive yellow envelope for Park at reception. All they now had to do was wait for whoever collected it, and follow them. Hopefully as a lead to Fuji as well as Jane.

It was almost 3.40, and Blake was beginning to fear that the trap was going to fail. He was hanging about the visitors' waiting area, reading a copy of *Newsweek* for the third time, and beginning to feel extremely conspicuous. There had been a number of false alarms as people came and went with parcels and documents, but the yellow envelope was still sitting there at the desk. Suddenly a motorcycle despatch rider came in, wearing full black leathers and matching menacing lid. He walked towards the desk but was intercepted by an irate security guard who began berating him loudly. The man bowed his head and took off the offending helmet: SGT, like many other companies, had a rule that motorcycle delivery people must remove their helmets and visors before entering, to reduce the risk of robbery. The young face revealed beneath smiled. A smile in Korea communicates embarrassment and regret. Blake's heart sank when he saw it was not Park, but soon began pumping faster as the envelope was collected. He just stopped himself from breaking into a run as he left the building ahead of the man, and rushed to the car.

'The man on the bike. He's just collected the envelope,' he said to Trent in the passenger seat, as he got behind the wheel and started up.

Trent cursed. It was a powerful-looking blood-red machine and looked impossible to keep up with in a saloon. 'We'll never hold him,' he cursed. 'Move over. I've taken speed-driving courses.'

The bike was already pulling away. 'I've done a bit of driving myself,' Blake replied, smiling to himself. He put the Lantra in gear and moved off smoothly, already three cars behind the rapidly accelerating bike.

Staying close was difficult in heavy traffic, the bike weaving in and out, and Blake almost lost him a couple of times. They seemed to be heading west, towards the Taeh Yon-Dong district, and Blake relaxed slightly as they were able to put on some speed on the wide centre-barriered highway, keeping the red bike in their sights. Relief was to be short-lived, however, as without signalling the rider took off down a slip-road just as Blake was overtaking slower traffic in his attempt to close the gap. If they overshot the slip-road they had lost him. Checking his mirrors, and switching on the hazard lights, Blake decided to go for it.

He started braking, using the ball of his right foot, whilst steering the car across the traffic flow, his wrist holding down the horn.

Trent yelled an expletive and took a tight hold of the passenger grab-handle. There was no gap when the manoeuvre began, but as other drivers fought to protect themselves a small window opened up.

As the brakes slowed him, Blake prepared to change down to third, missing out fourth, using the heel-and-toe racing technique. The engine and wheel speed came closer together, and he moved the heel of his right foot over to the accelerator, whilst still braking. When the change-down was executed, the front-wheel-drive car was perfectly balanced, the engine and wheel speed matched to avoid jerkiness and any loss of power. Squeezing the accelerator, revving at around 6000 on the tachometer, and still trail-braking, he was cutting across the two lanes of traffic absolutely on the limit of adhesion, the impossibly close turn-off hurtling towards them. But when in experienced hands, even standard saloons can achieve the impossible, maximum braking married with maximum speed and tyre footprint.

Suddenly it was over and they had made it, flying after the biker, still in sight. The blare of car horns which had accompanied the incident, however, had alerted the rider to them, and he turned around to look. Trent leaned over and switched off the hazards. There was another tight bend rushing at them, taken lazily by the expert rider, leaning into it, virtually grounding his outstretched knee, racing-fashion. Blake did not brake until what seemed to the white-faced Trent suicidally late. Heeling-and-toeing this time from third to second, he completed the shift just before turning in and gunning on, the eager 1800cc four-cylinder twin-cam bellowing in delight. They were now on regular two-lane suburban roads, and Blake was overtaking open-mouthed private drivers, and even Seoul's notorious cab drivers, hitting speeds of 85 mph in the built-up neighbourhood.

Trent had remembered now how Blake had insisted on a manual-shift car from Hertz, and that he had asked them to increase the tyre pressures by 10 psi all round. The fussiness about getting just the right driving position now also made sense 'You sure know how to handle this thing,' he yelled, impressed.

'Thanks,' Blake yelled back. 'But he now knows we're following him. He might run to ground '

As he spoke, the bike's brake lights briefly flared, and the rider seemed somehow to shake his machine like a matador's red cape

beside him as he executed a lightning-quick U-turn. He waved sarcastically at them as they raced past. Blake was fast approaching traffic lights at a crossroads. They were changing to red. It was a chance. Just a chance . . .

'Hold on!' he yelled.

Trent did as he was told, assuming that Blake was simply going to ignore the stop light and use the wider junction area to make a quick three-point turn. But when Blake actually accelerated, slamming past a slow truck, he knew what was coming. A full-blooded handbrake turn. 'Hell, no!' he shouted.

Blake had the black leather-covered steering wheel firmly in his left hand, holding it in a downturned fist at a twenty past six o'clock position, elbow up. His right hand was on the handbrake. Just before they overshot the light, in the brief lull between one traffic flow ending and the other beginning, he whipped the steering wheel sharply around to his left, just stopping himself from slipping the clutch, as he would on a rear-wheel drive, and pulling hard on the handbrake. For what seemed like an age they both felt suspended in a kind of balletic tableau, the world rushing past outside, the frozen images of wide-eyed, open-mouthed passers-by and other drivers somehow hovering in the air, dismembered like theatrical masks. The six-inch tyres screamed like banshees, and even Blake thought they would roll. He *knew* they would if they hit one of the kerbs . . . But then the steering wheel came alive in his hands again. They had grip! It had worked. Slamming the car into second, he corrected their drift with opposite lock, and they were again in fast pursuit of the bike.

'We can't do much more of this kind of thing!' Blake yelled 'We'll have been reported by now, and the police'll have cars and a chopper on to us before long. And the biker can keep up these U-turn stunts all day . . .'

'And you might kill one of us. Or someone else!' Trent called back. 'We've got to take him out somehow. I could sweat the address off him. That's a skill *I've* learned.'

'OK. I'll see what I can do!'

The red bike was a couple of hundred yards away. The rider had slowed right down, also worried about attracting Seoul's strict police. He had not seen the handbrake turn and so did not expect the Lantra to be anywhere near him when its distinctive maximum-revved engine note had him staring back in utter disbelief. But it was now

too late. Blake was already alongside him to his left, watching for a safe area. The biker was just about to stamp on his brakes to get free when the car slammed into him, throwing him and the bike separately into the netting of a clay-coloured playing field. The few people around kept walking, frightened by what they had witnessed, and no other cars stopped.

Blake stayed in the car, the engine running, as Trent sprinted over to the dazed but unhurt teenager. He quickly established that no bones were broken before roughly manhandling the rider into the back of the car and pulling off his helmet. 'Drive!' he ordered Blake.

Trent searched him, hoping to find a gun. But apart from the yellow envelope there was little other than some money and a ledger filled with Korean writing in ballpoint. It looked like some kind of order book. 'You speak English?' Trent demanded.

The rider shook his head.

'*Yong-o balsu-issum-nikka? Ee bae ba-seyo?*' Trent repeated, using an authoritative, rasping voice. Korean was by far the weakest of his oriental languages.

The biker, obviously frightened, answered him in a babble that stretched Trent's limited capabilities.

'Sounds to me like he really doesn't understand,' Blake said, driving sedately now. He was not wholly surprised by Trent's language skills, having heard him give a Hong Kong cab driver a hard time in Cantonese.

Trent had reached the same conclusion, and showing the man the yellow envelope, he barked, 'Park Chang-Hyun. *Chuso ga odi imnigga?* Park Chang-Hyun!' To encourage him Trent had him in a pressure hold, sinking his powerful fingers into his neck and shoulders. There was a whimper in response. '*Nappumnida!*' Blake warned, rapidly exhausting his vocabulary.

The fingers dug deeper, and then the rider snatched back his ledger. Tearing out the last page, he waved it at them, obviously frightened. '*Put'ak hamnida*,' he said, lowering his head.

'Park's must be the address in his book,' Trent said, peering at the handwritten *hangul*.

A cab was alongside them and Blake flagged it down. Grabbing the sheet of paper, he asked the driver if he knew the address. When he said he did, Blake told him to lead the way there. Korean addresses were, he knew from experience, extremely erratic and

difficult to find. Before they set off, he went to the back of the car and hauled out the biker. Trent followed, looking through the ledger. Sellotaped inside the cover was a company identity card with the delivery company's office address, the biker's name and his photograph. He pointed to it. 'You?'

The man nodded, still obviously afraid of them, thinking that perhaps they were from the American base. Some of the American military had a very bad name in Seoul. Perhaps they were gangsters.

Trent tore out the card, pocketing it, and then said, 'Park Chang-Hyun,' whilst shaking his head and shushing, a finger to his lips. Next he pointed at the biker and made a slashing gesture across his own throat. 'Understand?' he demanded. The sign-language threat needed no translation.

It was clear that the man did understand, and they let him go to hike back to his machine. Then Blake got back in the car, with Trent riding in the cab. The Lantra might by now be hot, but it was just getting dark and anyway the city was full of the things. They needed a car and would have to take their chances. At least this way, if Blake was stopped on the way there, Trent was still free to carry on alone. Fail-safe.

It was Saturday morning and Miss Wilkins was breakfasting with Richter and Mitchell in the Koreana Hotel. Richter had not wanted to be there, still not seeing why he could not put up a camp-bed at the SGT headquarters. He was having the time of his life with the task force and did not want to leave them even for a minute. Mitchell, however, had needed a first-hand briefing on progress to send back home. The vampire worm was still crashing systems everywhere, and corporate panic had firmly set in, not least among government departments, his own included.

'Have you had *any* sleep?' Miss Wilkins demanded, eyeing Richter beadily.

'Not much,' he confessed, shovelling down mounds of cold meat and cheese between gulps of coffee. 'There's no time. And I think we have solved it. Almost, I think.'

'So the task force has succeeded? I can tell my people this?' Mitchell urged.

'Pah! Task force . . . Let us say the father of Helminth is also his

destroyer. Like Wotan and Siegmund. The task force helped me with process, with bean-counting. That is all.'

Despite Richter's complete absence of modesty or team spirit, Mitchell already knew from other sources that what he was saying was essentially right. The young man's introverted genius was dazzling them – not least the watchful millionaire chairman. 'Can we really announce yet that we have a cure?' he insisted.

'I say we can. The chairman wants to tidy up how we give the advice to programmers on what to do. Before we go public. That's easy. We'll finish that by tomorrow. No problem.' He wiped his mouth on a napkin, and finished the dregs of his coffee. 'Now I go back Yes? I don't want any foul-ups over there.'

Miss Wilkins had to smile at this strange, talented, lonely boy, fretting like a mother hen over some unruly brood. 'That's fine,' she said, looking for confirmation at Mitchell. When Richter immediately stood up, she noticed he still seemed to be in pain. 'And, Gerhard, you really should get someone to look at that thing.'

Richter looked shocked and blushed. 'What . . . thing?' His hands involuntarily went to his crotch.

'Why, that awful scald from the coffee you spilled.'

He smiled an embarrassed, crooked smile and hurried to the door.

'An odd boy,' Miss Wilkins said fondly, watching him go.

'To you maybe. But a bloody nuisance to an awful lot of others. Now, on to the other bloody nuisance. Sool. I think it's time for that call, don't you? And this is the key one.'

'Where is he? Do we know?'

'Oh, we've found him easily enough. The Americans had a tracker and panic alarm planted on Jane Field and they've picked it up in the North. Pyongyang. His plane's there. And we've also picked him up using the Sat-phone. Calling his aide, Park, mostly.'

'Is that inside chap of yours with him. The English PR man?'

Mitchell shook his head. 'Blake? We don't know where the hell he is. I last spoke to him in Hong Kong. But even his company colleagues haven't heard from him for a day or so. All they can guess is that he's bunked up with someone for the weekend. It seems he's a womaniser.'

Miss Wilkins's mouth turned down in distaste. 'Very well. And, yes, I think you're right. It's time I attempted to renew my agony-aunt relationship with Sool. *If* he's still interested.' She still could not

understand why Sool seemed to want to stay in contact with her. At first she had thought it was simply to identify and trap her. But that was clearly no longer plausible. He knew exactly who she was.

'Oh, I think he'll still be very interested. Knowing what we now know, knowing what's been driving him, my people think that Sool's been using you as some kind of mother authority figure. I debriefed our shrink again at length in England as soon as we got back yesterday. He gave me a bit of a psycho-babble cultural crash course. But I have to admit it does at last make some sense of things. Filial responsibilities, he explained, are central to Confucianism. There's no direct parallel with our Judeo-Christian tradition of confession and atonement. But it seems the dominant strand of Korean Yi-dynasty Confucianism does revolve around four basic human feelings, defined as commiseration, shame, modesty, and right and wrong. Overlaid with seven emotions, including anger. And you, a parent figure, have punished Sool, in his eyes, for his disgrace.

'Severely punished him And that's exactly what he's been craving since finding out the terrible, shameful news. He wants to be punished for the shame of being half Japanese. More than half, in fact. According to the Korean *kab jok* approach to family, the only important bloodline is the father's. And he wants to be punished for killing his own mother. Killing her through the shame he brought her. It also explains the increasingly sado-masochistic sexual demands it seems he's been making on Jane Field. And the extreme sado-masochism of the murder tapes. The comfort woman information ties up all the loose ends about our Mr Sool. In fact, he's damn near textbook material.'

Miss Wilkins took a moment to digest it all. It certainly did make sense of the way Sool had been behaving – to her and generally. It also made her 'secret weapon' doubly powerful as an extra lever on the man. 'I assume you want me to try and get him here?'

'It's my only hope of stopping whatever he's planned for Monday. I now know for sure it will be directed at Japan generally, and those connected with the war in particular. We've already alerted the Japanese security service, and requested details of anything special happening on Monday. Anything that could amount to a target. Also, you must try and persuade him to have the American officer's wife freed. Sool won't admit even to you any involvement in the tapes, I'm pretty sure of that. So simply tell him people think he has influence

to help free the woman. It's important. If her husband's got it into his head that grabbing Sool is the only way to get her back, then I wouldn't bet against him getting to him before we do. Apparently he's an expert on Asia and the Far East, and very much knows his way around.' Mitchell looked and sounded tired Like Richter, he too had been up all night. But then she had been on the phone half the night herself. For her own reasons.

'What excuse do I give? He's hardly going to relish the prospect, is he?'

'The plan we have is for you to try and convince him to come here on Monday, to announce the financial failure of SGT. Face the music. Take it on the chin. All that. Tell him he can blame it all on the virus. No need for any reference to the derivatives mess. And as of now you can also give him some good news to go with the bad. He could front the announcement to the world that his own SGT experts, working with the international task force, have solved the Helminth problem. That should be a draw. Damn it, he can present himself as a poor victim who has now saved the world, for all I care. Just get him here. So we and the Koreans can work on him to call off the bombing attack. He's no idea we know about his Russian contract, and won't suspect anything. And he also knows the FBI still have absolutely no hard evidence of his involvement with the tapes. In fact, from where he's sitting right now, believe it or not, he hasn't broken any laws. He's free to come and go as he wishes, here or anywhere else. The derivatives disaster was all perfectly legal. There's no proof of insider dealing. Especially as it failed. And all he's done is to become the latest high-flying tycoon to get his wings scorched.

'What do you say? Think you can pull it off?'

Miss Wilkins smiled. 'I think I might. Especially with the help of my "special weapon".'

He raised his eyebrows. 'And what exactly is that?' he asked.

'His aunt. I told her what we knew, and asked if she would join me in demanding that he come back to face things. She said yes immediately. There are devils that now need defeating. A neighbour has a telephone in the house. Sool Kyung-Wha has agreed to join me in a conference call to him If together the two of us can't get him back for Monday, nobody can. Let's go and set up the call. Let's do it now.'

Mitchell looked at her with now-familiar awe. He knew from tape

transcripts exactly why she had been on the telephone all night. And now this. What an extraordinary woman, he thought for the hundredth time. What a truly extraordinary woman.

He was just signing for the breakfast when he saw one of the embassy men hurrying towards them – a junior diplomat with some intelligence duties. He handed Mitchell a note, without speaking. Looking at it discreetly, Mitchell put it away in his inside pocket.

'Tell him I'm coming straight round. Don't let him disappear.'

Miss Wilkins looked curiously at him. 'Any news?'

'Maybe,' he replied. 'The PR man's just turned up at the embassy asking for me.'

Cold, stiff and hungry, Trent had been watching the entrance to the apartment block for over four hours, since Blake had left him, following their overnight vigil. After the cab led them to the address, they sat in the car debating what to do next. Blake had felt it best, given their success in running Park to ground, to involve Mitchell or his people. They were better placed than the two of them either to confront Park about where Sool was, or to put in place really effective surveillance in the hope that he might lead them to him. Trent had not liked this, knowing it was highly likely that Blake's MI6 contact would by now have been briefed by his own service on his disappearance. They would certainly have assumed he had gone after Sool. Yet as a professional he also knew that Blake was right. They could not hope to conduct an efficient watch with just the two of them, and the stakes involved in losing Park were far too high to risk. In the end he had sourly agreed that Blake should take a cab in the morning to see Mitchell at the embassy. But he was not to make any reference to himself. Or that they had even met. The decision to follow Park must be seen to be Blake's alone. That way, Trent would stay free from the Americans – powerful in Seoul thanks to the large US military presence there – and retain some flexibility if he did not like what he saw of how the British handled things. Blake promised to reach him on the car phone and brief him on what Mitchell planned to do as early as he could. Meantime, Trent would keep watch, and follow Park should he move on somewhere.

After the uncomfortable, interminable waiting around, however, he had begun to wonder what was taking Blake so long. Certainly, nothing much was happening at the apartment. It was in one of

the forest of near-identical modern blocks for lower-income people that line the highway through the district of Kangso-gu, south of the Han-gang. The people coming and going about their business were very different in style and dress to the elegant, sophisticated, business-suited Park he knew from New York and Hong Kong. And although watching carefully for a dressed-down Park, Trent was confident he would know him again.

It was gone noon when an old man in a battered, rusty car drew up directly in front of the Lantra outside the block, and began laboriously to manoeuvre his way into a narrow space beside Trent. The vehicle had stalled, with the driver having no success restarting, when Trent suddenly saw Park coming out of the building, walking quickly to his car several spaces away from them. Cursing, but afraid to make a scene and be noticed, Trent had to wait until Park's huge white 4×4 SsangYong Musso had pulled away before leaping out and trying desperately to push the other car out of his way. It was immediately clear that it was hopeless. The car's battery was now too flat to turn the engine over, and despite Trent's angry gesturing and pidgin Korean the man refused to get out of his car or to permit himself to be pushed out of the way. Worse still, a group of leather-jacketed youths, hanging around a motorcycle, were approaching, clearly intent on picking a fight with the bullying foreigner. There were six of them, all in their early twenties, and their leader, who had been showily revving the bike, was soon shouting at Trent and pushing him, the others close behind jeering Where the hell was Blake and the cavalry when he needed them? Trent thought bitterly.

He knew there was no time for diplomacy, the distinctive white SsangYong already at the junction with the highway. The youth was still shouting a challenge, adopting a *t'aekwon-do* pose from the ferocious form of Korean martial arts. Trent had to assume that the man would have been army-trained, by virtue of the country's conscription policy. Cursing, he looked around to plan his next move The motorcycle was still ticking over, fifty feet away. There could only be one plan, but that meant getting past the circling, menacing pack. FBI agents are trained in self-defence and unarmed – 'empty hand' – combat, but the lessons are mostly concerned with protective, reactive moves. In the same way, the Korean police are routinely taught *yudo*, a development of the ancient *yusul*. With his special passion for the Orient, however, Trent had become expert

from his college days in a number of the martial arts, and was a black belt in *ju-jitsu*. That had to be the answer.

His shoulder still hurt like hell from the bomb injuries, and the effects of his last painkillers had long since worn off. For several reasons whatever happened next had to be quick and dramatic. Physically he was simply not up to a long and probing contest. There was no more than perhaps a minute to spare to get to that bike if he was not going to lose Park. And he knew that he had to beat the leader dramatically and decisively, in order to humiliate him and scare the rest off.

Ju-jitsu it was.

Taking a deep breath, Trent cleared his mind and focused completely on what he had to do. The youth was adopting a position with his left leg forward, hands chest high. The attack was seconds away, and Trent visualised the most likely first move, and his own response options. First, he had to assume that the position was indeed *t'aekwon-do*, although most other martial arts also begin that way. If so, the move when it came would almost certainly be flashy, to impress his gang – and to astound the ignorant foreigner who surely knew nothing about the art of *t'aekwon-do*. If he was right, a classic opening attack would be a jumping kick to the body, to smash through the opponent's defence, landing on the left foot and in the same flowing movement pivoting into a spinning hook-kick to his head. That, he decided, was a strong possibility, and he knew exactly how to respond.

To keep the ignorant-Westerner image intact, he adopted a clumsy-looking boxer's stance. The big question was would the man lead with his left or right foot? The right was generally more powerful, but the left faster. Looking at the youth's shifting weight balance, he was betting on the left. He was also betting that the young thug had spent more time looking flashy on the mats, or on gimmicky high kicks in the air, than actually fighting in earnest. There was, he well knew, a huge difference. This, and the element of surprise, were all he had going for him, injured, alone and surrounded in this dark street thousands of miles from home.

The lightning-fast kick was launched at him with the left, and Trent's reactions now took over from planning and game-plays. When the foot and the man's whole body were totally committed to the forward attack, Trent just as quickly snapped into the classic counter-attack, stepping to his left, raising and straightening his

right arm, and moving his own weight forward. The arm was now like an iron bar as the classic ridge-hand strike slammed into the man's throat, compacting all the forward force of the attacker's own momentum into Trent's countervailing forward thrust. The man let out a cry, somersaulted and landed heavily, his head cracking sickeningly on the tarmac. Knowing his man was already out of it, Trent lifted his right foot threateningly over the heaving chest.

Turning to face the five others, aggressively beckoning them on, he spat derisively in Korean his old *ju-jitsu* teacher's words, 'Kick high and die!'

Experienced street fighters keep their action low, but it was unlikely any of them heard or understood a word of what Trent had said. They were stunned by the speed and consummate efficiency with which the Westerner had taken out the district's most feared gang leader. They were stunned, and now afraid Trent, reading the situation, calmly frisked the man, still needing to find a gun. There was nothing. Then, as he walked towards the group, they parted reverentially to let him through. They now thought he was awesome, a hero. Trent knew that he had just been very lucky, but he swaggered a bit nonetheless as he climbed on the bike. Nobody tried to stop him as he took it, almost symbolically – a trophy from the defeated local chief.

It was some years since Trent had ridden a motorcycle in anger, and he rapidly tried to familiarise himself with the controls. It was a 250cc Hyosung. Pulling the clutch in with his left hand, and pressing down with his foot on the gear pedal, he rolled the machine forward off its stand, hoping not to lose balance or stall. But there were no disasters and he did no worse than lurch forward, narrowly avoiding an unintentional wheelie, before gunning hard after Park, the exhaust thundering behind him.

Just as he joined the highway, the mobile phone in the Lantra began to ring. One of the gang went over to the car, reached inside and ripped out the handset before smashing it angrily on the ground.

Back in the embassy Blake continued to redial, each time getting an unobtainable tone. Mitchell and his local man were still in the secure room down the corridor, nearing the end of what had proved to be a long and acrimonious debriefing session. Mitchell obviously did not believe that Blake was telling the whole truth about Hong Kong and his tailing of Park. He had got away for

these few minutes only by insisting that he had to ring Globecom about some confidential issues connected with other clients, and nothing to do with SGT. In fact he was by then very anxious to let Trent know that Mitchell was not sending a surveillance team, that they knew where Sool and Jane were, and that any contact between Sool and Park on the Sat-phone was being monitored. Most important of all, though, he needed to let Trent know how confident Mitchell seemed about actually getting Sool himself to Seoul on Monday.

The need to watch and follow Park had just evaporated. Sool was now expected to come to them If things went to plan he would be standing at some hotel lectern addressing the world media in less than two days' time. Just when it was absolutely vital that he get news to Trent, he seemed to have lost all means of contact with him. Blake knew his new friend was a desperate man, and was afraid of what he might do next. He felt he should tell Mitchell, but could not bring himself to break his promise.

With a shrug, he went back to submit to the remainder of his grilling in the secure room. Things did not feel right, but he did not know what to do. On the other hand, Trent was a trained professional and no fool. Surely he would not do anything really crazy . . .

24

Jane was feeling terrible. She had the mother of all hangovers, together with the guilt that for her always accompanied any kind of indulgent binge. She was also feeling very sore and very bruised.

Sool had been at his worst ever the night before. He had introduced the sado-masochism into their relationship slowly, and by stages. At first it had been playful and incidental to their highly charged early sexual repertoire as noisy new lovers. The odd slap from him, the odd pinch and scratch from her. Before long, however, the slapping had become harder. Much harder. Sool always blushed as he beat her, his shame – a condition that normally repressed desires – being channelled instead through this unnatural outlet. An outlet – sadism – that under the burden of guilt would turn next to masochism. Jane still had a very low feeling of self-worth during this time, from her days on the bottle. And while she hated the perversion, all its accompanying shame and humiliation did seem to atone somehow for her weaknesses. Crime and punishment. It made some sort of depressing sense.

But later she began to realise that there was more to it than that.

She had looked down into the inviting, swirling depths of depravity. The pain, then the glow, and finally the infernal, insatiable, sublime irritation . . . She knew for some this could become the destination rather than part of the journey. It was at this point of self-revelation, and self-disgust, that she began angrily refusing him. It was also at this point – in Las Vegas – that she began really to fear and then hate Sool.

Last night had been horrible. A nightmare. Too drunk to resist, she now had half-memories of him doing what he wanted to her, for as long as he wanted – binding her and gagging her to muffle her screams in the grave-quiet apartment block. She had come to in the early hours, naked and shivering, alone in the child's bed in the spare room. The sheets were bloodstained and her body smarted and ached from weals and raw bruises. Disoriented and frightened, she had stumbled into the other bedroom and found Sool sleeping, snoring like a pig. A surge of red rage swept over her, the alcohol still coursing through her system, as she picked up the heavy wooden bedside lamp and smashed it wildly down, grazing his cheekbone and cutting into the side of his head. The second frenzied blow was on its way as Sool somehow gathered his senses and rolled away, falling to the floor. Jane now froze as he rose to his feet, staring madly at her, blood pouring from his hair. She saw his fist fly but could not move to avoid it. Then there had been blackness . . .

This time she had come to in the main bed, and heard Sool making calls on the Sat-phone from the sitting room. Gingerly she touched her chin where he had punched her. It felt as though it might be broken. Desperately she fled to the bathroom and inspected the wreck of her face.

Some supermodel she looked now No sign of the Creature in that mirror – badly swollen chin, probably a black eye on the way, bloodshot eyes, and hair matted and horrible. At least her teeth had escaped. Looking now at her body, she felt weak and nauseous at its livid record of her abuse. She also remembered trying to kill him – for that was exactly what she had drunkenly intended. A shower, clean hair and some care and maintenance from her make-up bags were urgently required. She needed to think, to decide what to do. And she could never think straight looking a mess. Some touchstone of order was required.

Sool heard the shower running, and also touched his head wound

gingerly. It would probably have benefited from a few stitches but the cut had now congealed, hidden under his hair. She had obviously meant him serious harm, and he kept a sharp eye on the door to the bathroom.

He had spoken a couple of hours earlier to Park, and told him he intended to return to Seoul as soon as he could. It was a message which, thanks to his scrambler, Mitchell would not receive from the American DIA until late that evening. Park was to make ready his weekend hideaway, a house he owned on the east coast looking out to Mount Sorak. A four-hour drive from Seoul, it was to this that he had escaped in 1995 for the period of isolation on hearing his mother's news. He would fly out of the North as soon as they let him, and to the local airport – Sokch'o. How he would get there was a problem. His pilot would not be able to fly direct, the North and South still on a war footing. They would have to go via Hong Kong, or even Beijing. The only other regular international air route to and from Pyongyang was even further away, up north to Khabarovsk in Russia. Then from China they would have to submit a flight plan to South Korea and wait for it to be accepted. Returning to China, albeit in transit, also seemed a bad idea, but at all costs, he told Park, he simply had to get out. The DPRK had ordered him to leave, but would they co-operate with the flight plan? Lying low again at Sorak suddenly seemed very attractive. But if the North would not help, who could?

When the Sat-phone rang, he assumed it was Park. Her voice therefore surprised him, and he sat up straight involuntarily, as at junior school when the teacher walked in.

'Chairman Sool? Miss Wilkins. I hope I'm not calling at an inopportune time.'

'No. It's all right,' he blustered. As ever, she had unsettled him.

'Good. Because I have some important things to say. Where exactly are you?'

'Not far away. But still very far away,' he replied. 'I'm in the North. In Pyongyang.'

'Well, I want you back *here*,' she said firmly. 'I want you to come back immediately and personally manage the news of SGT's collapse on Monday. I know of this. Hear me out. If you agree, you will save the face of your managers – your company *family*, that's what you always called them. And you will avoid damaging your nation in the eyes of the world. South Korea is admired and

respected everywhere for its people, its industrial successes and ability to deliver what it promises. If you leave SGT to the dogs, then you will be damaging the nation I know you love.'

'But what could I say?' he protested. 'I am disgraced. I have brought dishonour to my country.'

'That is why I needed to talk to you urgently. We have found a way to stop the spread of the vampire worm. My young German genius has helped your own people find an antidote which we must announce on Monday. It's very good news. And SGT computer engineers and programmers can take all the credit. Think of it. You personally can take the credit for saving international business from this devastating crisis. You will overnight become a business hero, not a villain. Yourself the first victim of this act of business terrorism. Something that has tragically brought down your own company. It could have happened to anybody.

'But you, you will be respected as a captain of industry for going down with the ship. And for putting the security of the world's computers before your own company self-interests. Nobody need know anything about China – the Chinese leadership certainly would not want it known that some officials acted corruptly. And the derivatives crisis, when it does finally become public, will be seen as something inextricably linked to the collapse of your capital base, thanks to the problems stemming from Chiasmus Communications and the Helminth.'

Sool's head was swimming. It all sounded too pat, too good to be true. She was making out that he could simply fly home like some brave, wounded corporate warrior. A hero back from noble defeat in a bloody battle. Surely it could not be that simple. Yet what she had said did make complete sense. On the other hand, how on earth did she know so much? He was sure he had not told her about the Chinese deal, or the derivatives contracts. 'What you say sounds very straightforward,' he replied, cautiously. This woman was not what she seemed.

'It is. After all, if you come into SGT on Monday morning here in Seoul, it will begin like any other day. Nobody knows anything of what is about to unfold. Just a handful of your financial people, and I'm sure they only have part of the picture. You can return and ride this out. It's the only thing to do.'

It all suddenly sounded so easy. She was of course right. Nobody but he and Park knew the whole picture, the China deal and the

derivatives. The revenge on the old Japanese army officers, the final ferocious revenge that would take place on Monday – his accursed birthday – in Tokyo. Suddenly his shattered self-confidence began to grow. He had stumbled, but he could be invincible again. A rat-hole in the North was no place for him, nor hiding away in the mountains. He would go back. He would ride through it all, and start again. Fifty-two was still young. The attack in Tokyo would be his last, purging act of revenge. He still had a life, thanks to this extraordinary woman. 'I will do it. I have decided,' he said finally, arrogance back in his tone.

'Good. Good. Then you will face the world media? To manage the news yourself properly. If you wish, I can arrange meetings for you at SGT on Monday morning with our task force people. They'll tell you what to say about the antidote. And I could tell your PR people to set up some kind of press conference.'

'Do it. Do it,' he said, excited now. 'There is a man called Blake. From our agency. Get him to do it, and meet me Monday for a briefing. He may still be in Hong Kong. Get him over.'

Miss Wilkins had been concentrating intently on what she was doing, eyes closed to help her picture and focus on him. Now at last she looked round over her shoulder. Blake gave her a thumbs-up, and Mitchell smiled encouragingly. None knew that Sool was already anxious to return to the South, but talking him in to coming back to SGT and fronting a press conference was a major coup for Miss Wilkins. Her task, however, was far from over. The tricky part of the call was about to begin. 'I'll get on to that,' she said, enthusiastically. 'But, Mr Sool, there's more. I want your help with something in return. Will you do something for me?'

'You have helped me more than you can know. Yes. If I can, I will help.'

'Thank you. It is this. There is a Japanese-American called Fuji Trent. Some terrible people are holding her captive, and threatening to kill her. I am told she is probably somewhere in California.'

'Yes?' Sool was mystified. He had never heard of the woman, and knew nothing about the kidnapping.

'You are to make whatever telephone calls you must to have her freed. Immediately.' There was a sternness now in her tone. 'This is not negotiable, if you wish me to continue to support you.'

'But I know nothing of this woman. Nothing!' he objected. It was true, but he realised perfectly well that Park managed all his dealings

with the gangsters and terrorists. None knew who had hired them, or why. In return Sool had no wish to know who had gone about his murderous business.

'Listen to me,' Miss Wilkins said. 'There are things I know. Terrible things in America. You understand me? I also know why. Sool, I *know*. I know everything. And I think I can understand. But it has to stop. You must stop the evil. You must help free the woman. And prevent any more terrible things.'

Sool went white. Pah! How could she know? Nobody knew about *that*. Not even Park. But this Miss Wilkins woman . . . She seemed to have some powers he did not understand. It was possible. With her anything seemed possible. 'What is it you say you know?' He tried to force levity into his reply, as if it were some kind of joke.

'I know about the tragedy of your mother. About the letter she sent to you. I know about the revenge, and the murders.'

Her words cut into him like a knife. Beads of cold sweat suddenly formed on his brow and neck, and he found it difficult now to concentrate. The peripeteia completely threw him, and he was suddenly floundering mentally and physically. 'But how could you . . .?'

Then the shock turned to clinical trauma as a new voice seemed to fill his head, his whole being. His mind swimming, he could feel her physically there beside him. Smell her musky presence.

'Sool Kay-Sheen. Devils were released from the first message I brought from your mother. I now have a second message. From her spirit.' The voice of his aunt, Sool Kyung-Wha, was unmistakable. 'You are to do as the venerable foreign woman asks. You are to drive back the devils. This I ask you. This your mother commands.'

They had been driving for almost two hours, crossing Seoul and heading east towards Kap-yong and beyond towards the mountains. Keeping the white Musso in his sights from a safe distance had been no problem. Speed limits were 100 kph on the expressway, and 80 on the main highways, although Park, like almost everyone else on the road that Saturday, went much faster where traffic permitted. Trent had now become comfortable on the bike, but was conscious that he had no helmet and could easily be pulled in by the police. Add to that his lack of any licence or insurance, plus the fact that he had stolen the machine, and being stopped was a constant concern. No

less so than the Korean drivers' endemic lack of consideration for riders, either not watching for them in their mirrors, or dismissing them with some motoring-style Confucianism as a lower order that ought at all times to defer to those in the almighty car.

Park's right indicator suddenly came on, and he was pulling over to the side of the highway in the emergency lane. This was serious. Trent was twenty or so cars behind, and if he also pulled over he would be completely exposed. Seconds later he roared past the SsangYong, and saw that Park was talking on the phone. All he could do was slow down and pull over somewhere before the next turn-off. All was not lost. The highway had a central barrier, and Park would have to keep going whether he intended carrying straight on or turning around.

It was almost ten minutes before the flustered Park had finished his conversation with the angry Sool. Who was this Japanese-American, Fuji Trent? Find out! Have her freed. Now! Or the penalty on her captors would be high. He still had money. He still had power. And forget about the Sorak hideaway. He was flying back to Seoul. Back to SGT. To hold a press conference. Find Blake. Make sure he got the message. They would all meet on Monday morning. The press conference had to be held at noon precisely. Go back to Seoul. He would speak to him again when the pilot had resolved the issue of the flight.

Taking out his pocket computer organiser, he checked the time in Los Angeles and found Arnold Beeker's list of numbers. It was around three on Saturday afternoon in Korea, ten o'clockish Friday night in L.A. He tapped out the number of Beeker's mobile on his own Sat-phone, the same model as Sool's. It rang three times and the man answered.

'Can you talk?'

'Who is this?'

'Mr Chang.' Park often used a Chinese name with uncultured Westerners. They never knew the difference between the oriental races and he did not want anyone to think of him as Korean. Beeker had been led to think of 'Mr Chang' as a go-between for the powerful and feared Tongs, and the snuff murders as retaliation against the equally feared Japanese Yakuzas. If ordinary citizens were afraid of the Mafia, then the mobsters were themselves afraid of the oriental gangs, with their unfathomable codes, fanatical loyalty and wild-eyed, machete blood-lust.

'Sure I can talk.' Beeker thought he had heard the last of Chang – the contract over, the money received. His main preoccupation remained to keep the FBI at bay over the murders.

'A woman. Fuji Trent. You know of this?'

'No. Never heard of her.'

'Well, this woman you never heard of. I want her free. Now. Immediate. And unharmed. If you knew such a woman, you would not disappoint us.' Park was now scrolling up Beeker's details on the organiser.

'You could be sure I'd never do anything to upset you and your colleagues, Mr Chang.' Beeker meant it. The Tongs scared the hell out of him.

'Good. That is all I wanted to hear. And thank you. And Merry Christmas when it comes,' Park said. 'Have you done your shopping yet?'

'Have I *what*?'

'Your Christmas shopping. For your son maybe? Gary? He's, what, fourteen now? Living back east with his mother.'

Beeker went cold. 'There's no need for any of this. I told you. You got what you asked for.'

'Then we understand one another. That is satisfactory.' With that Park hung up and closed the Sat-phone case before driving on. At the next exit he would have to turn around to get back to Seoul. He had a lot to do for his chairman and not much time.

Mitchell was reading the transcript of Sool's earlier Sat-phone conversation with Park, about returning to the South, the hideaway, and being forced to leave by the People's Republic.

So, they had been pushing on an open door as far as his return was concerned, for the North also was anxious to see him go. And for the North, he thought, read China. It was clear they were finding any link with Sool a potential embarrassment. The irony Mitchell now faced was the North and the Chinese wanting him out, and the South and its allies wanting him in. The massive logistical problem was how to achieve it? Sool's pilot had already submitted a flight plan to take them to Beijing, and on to Seoul. The air traffic authorities in Beijing, however, were routinely refusing to accept it – partly because of origin of registration – and so was Seoul – because of the flight's North Korean leg. Stalemate. And the obvious answer – a direct short hop down from Sunan International to Kimpo – would

be unprecedented. It certainly could not take place officially. But Mitchell spent his life dealing with things that officially never took place. It would be damn near impossible, but he would give it a shot. If the Chinese authorities used their clout with Pyongyang, and the Americans asked Seoul . . .

'What will you do?' Jane asked Sool.

They were eating hot food that had just been brought to them at the apartment for Sunday lunch, some thin soup that tasted of nothing and a couple of portions of rice and greasy chicken Having circled and avoided each other all Saturday as best they could in the confined space, they had at last begun to talk. Now that Miss Wilkins knew, it had been easier for him to share what had happened, and he told her things. About his mother. But not about the revenge videos. And not about Tokyo. 'I will start again,' he replied, in a matter-of-fact way. His mood was now optimistic and cheerful.

He really did seem to believe he could simply file the last two murderous years away as if they no longer counted. If she had only suspected his madness before, it was now on full display. Try as she might, she could not come near to understanding, however gutting the cause, the provocation, how he – how anyone – could have acted in the way he did. What was clear was his obvious ability to compartmentalise this behaviour, and seem perfectly normal in other respects. Her own therapy had taught her something about psychology, and she recognised the symptoms of paranoid schizophrenia. And in his obsessiveness about punctuality, room temperatures, dates, cleanliness and petty orderliness she now saw the psychopath revealed. She also knew she was lucky to be alive. 'I'll willingly go back with you to Seoul,' she said, using her *nunchi*, cautiously, monitoring his mood. 'But then I would like to leave. Alone. You must see that now. After all this . . .'

He smiled in embarrassment, not wishing to be reminded of what he had done to her. That was neatly filed in another compartment. 'Of course. It is good we live apart. For a time.'

'Yes. Good friends,' she said, still nervous of a sudden mood swing. 'When do we get to go? Today?' They were all packed and ready.

As if in reply, the door flew open and the same official from the previous day strode in, followed by two soldiers. The men

immediately began taking out the luggage. 'Come,' the man said. He started, seeing Jane for the first time. Despite the bruised cheek and eye, her beauty mesmerised him, and for a few seconds he was yet another rabbit caught in the lights. She looked away, not wanting to encourage this effect, unsure of what was about to happen to them.

Sool noticed none of this. He stood up. 'Are we ready? Can we fly out?'

The man tried to recover himself, still feeling unsettled by his first encounter with Western beauty and sexuality. 'Yes. You are both to leave. Now.'

'And we have permission to fly to Beijing?'

'No. That is not permitted. You are to go by another route.'

Sool was perplexed. His pilot had told him that effectively there was no route other than via China. 'You are sending us to Russia?' he asked incredulously.

'You are flying direct to Seoul,' the man said, even more incredulous himself. 'And whoever you are, you must be very important. Or wanted very badly. This flight will never be talked about. It never took place. Remember that. Both of you.'

Sunan International is thirty kilometres west of the city, and the journey – in a small cavalcade – took less than thirty minutes. They were driven straight to the Gulfstream, its engines already running, and their bags loaded immediately in the hold at the back. There were no formalities, and as soon as they were aboard, Sool's nervous pilot began to taxi to the runway. They took off and climbed steeply, heading north-west across Korea Bay, the flight path to Beijing. The pilot warned them to keep their seatbelts on for the whole journey, and half an hour out they realised why. From seemingly nowhere two gunmetal-grey North Korean fighters blasted past, one each side, buffeting them with turbulence. They peeled off ahead and made a hundred and eighty degree turn. The Gulfstream immediately followed the tight turn, uncharacteristically throwing them around. 'I'm sorry about that, sir. I was given instructions to follow the jets when they arrived. They are to accompany us to South Korean air-space. Somehow, someone has done the impossible. We're being allowed to fly straight in, as if we were completing a Beijing – Seoul flight plan.' The pilot tried to make his voice sound normal and reassuring, but his nervousness was still evident.

The two single-seater variable-geometry ground-attack Su–20/22

fighters were capable of supersonic Mach 1.74, to the Gulfstream's subsonic Mach 0.87. They had to trim their speed to make a V formation, one either side and barely a plane's length behind. Jane turned and saw the pilot on her side looking in at her. She waved, and he dared a wave back. It all seemed exciting and fun until she noticed the Sukhoi's armaments – the guns in the wingroot and the Atoll air-to-air missiles. Looking across the aisle at Sool, she saw that he was tense. He now knew what the North Korean officer had meant. To get clearance for this extraordinary flight, either someone wanted rid of him very much, or someone wanted to get their hands on him no less keenly. Perhaps both, he thought grimly, suddenly questioning the wisdom of returning after all. What was it this Miss Wilkins woman was leading him into now?

It seemed like only forty minutes or so before the Sukhois suddenly peeled off and disappeared. It had become eerily quiet, lonely even, when, approaching from the front, two more fighters shot past, and then reappeared alongside, picking up the V formation as before. Sool immediately recognised the South Korean Air Force Lockheed 52D F-16Cs, built in Korea by his competitor *chaebol* Samsung Aerospace. They were even faster than the Sukhois, capable of over Mach 2. He looked grimly at the wingtip-mounted Sidewinder missiles and back at the young pilot, his eyes fixed on his head-up display. Once again the sheer enormity of what he was doing, of what he had done, cowered him.

As they approached Kimpo the fighters disappeared as quickly as they had come, back to base with 161 Squadron, and the Gulfstream started its descent into what increasingly now felt to Sool like a trap. A very skilfully sprung trap.

'Seat belts on. Coming in to land,' the pilot announced, then added in a puzzled voice, 'To cargo. We're being directed to the cargo terminal.'

Jane looked over at Sool again, but he did not respond. He knew what the instruction meant even if Jane and the pilot did not. This flight had not existed. They were to be kept out of sight. Like sacks of mail.

The morning routine had become almost reassuring to Fuji

At eight o'clock, one of the two regular guards would unlock the door to the small office and let her use the bathroom and shower. She knew that one of them had dug a crude and obvious hole in the wall through which to watch her, but it no longer seemed to

matter. Despite her constant fear, and the verbal abuse, neither had dared seriously to lay a hand on her. Each seemed prone to touching her breasts 'accidentally' as they manhandled her to and from the bathroom, but it was clear that they had been warned off by someone. After that, they would bring in breakfast. Coffee and cereals. She would eat perched on the camp-bed in the otherwise empty warehouse office, the tray on her knees. After that she would undertake an hour of exercise to get her pulse-rate pounding, followed by a period of meditation. They allowed her nothing to read, or even a radio. Lunch came at around 12.30, always some microwaved meal in its carton, mostly pasta, with more coffee.

She had long since discounted her own safety, and channelled all her positive thoughts towards Richard. There was just one thing to comfort her. Her sole value as leverage was through her husband. In a fatalistic way, she knew that as long as he lived, she lived – and if he died she wanted to join him anyway.

Something was odd that morning, however. They had let her use the bathroom as normal, but not the shower. And they had not brought any breakfast. It was almost eleven when she finally heard the familiar footsteps along the corridor. The door flew open and the guard she liked most gestured for her to go with him. Trembling, she grabbed her coat and did as instructed. Whatever all this had been leading towards, it was about to happen. Looking back, even her little room now seemed comforting and safe. She would never see it again, the place that had been the centre of her universe for eight long days and nights. Nothing bad had really happened there. The ordered, almost monastic life she had created had been endurable, even fulfilling. She felt fitter, spiritually stronger and somehow closer to Richard than ever before.

Outside was a dark blue Ford van, its back windows blackened. The guard pushed her in and looked her in the eye sadly. 'I'll miss you,' he said with apparent sincerity, then he slammed the rear door and locked it.

The driver pulled away immediately and she fell over in the darkness, before locating the bench seat. Sitting there alone and afraid, she tried to figure out what the guard's goodbye had meant. Perhaps they were just moving her somewhere new. Perhaps she was being freed. Or, perhaps Richard was dead, or they decided he needed teaching a lesson . . .

• • •

Blake was busy with Globecom's Seoul office, trying to find a venue in which to hold the press conference the next day. In addition to Miss Wilkins passing on Sool's request for him to handle it, he had also received a call from Park, who had told him that Sool would address the world media at noon on Monday, and that Globecom was to organise it. Sool would see him at SGT on Monday morning to look over a draft press statement and speech notes. There would be no question-and-answer session and no interviews. Blake's brief was to explain that it was the Helminth vampire worm which had caused SGT's downfall. Sool had lost his business to disgraceful international terrorism, something that could hit any other great corporation at any time. SGT's brilliant engineers, however, had worked around the clock and developed the antidote to protect customers and others tragically affected. Chairman Sool Kay Sheen would now work fully with the administrators to manage the sale of his subsidiary companies as going concerns, maximising payments to creditors. Everything would be done to maintain the proud reputation of Korean industry worldwide. That and protecting his family of workers was paramount to the chairman.

Even Blake almost felt Sool to be a heroic victim when it was put like that. The Globecom wordsmiths would, he knew, be able to put a very credible spin on this line Park then wanted to know what had happened to the Chinese press statement Blake had been so insistent on sending him on Friday. He had sent a messenger to collect it, but it had never been delivered to him. Blake said he was puzzled, but it no longer mattered. The Chinese had decided against issuing anything after all. But where was he, Park, anyway? He would like to meet up and have a pre-briefing with him that day. What in fact he wanted was to try to locate Trent But Park was having none of it. He could not meet, and would see Blake in the chairman's office as arranged the following morning. Then the line went dead.

There was a lot to do. The media in Seoul are reasonably contained and easy to reach. The local agency had the home numbers of all the key national and international journalists and had already started calling, faxing and posting Internet messages to them. These would be followed up first thing the next morning, and there would be a round-up at the Seoul Press Centre across the way from the Hotel Lotte where they had booked a conference room. It was a big news

story. Getting people there would not be the problem. In fact, it could easily become a media circus. That was Blake's main worry. There would be virtually no time for rehearsal, and it could soon get out of hand.

On the personal front things were looking much better. Mitchell had reassured him that Jane was well, and flying back with Sool. They would have touched down by now and were to be separately questioned all afternoon (probably into the evening in Sool's case) by the South Korean authorities – police, security service and the central bank – before the British and Americans would be allowed to join in the interrogations. Mitchell still somehow had to get a handle on whatever Sool had planned in Tokyo with the Russian. After that, Blake could see her. They were both staying at the Lotte, and unless Mitchell or any of the rest got in the way, he hoped they could have dinner together. And more.

The eager young man he had commandeered to act as his assistant came over to him. They were in the main building at the Lotte on the third floor, making decisions on seating, sound systems and general people-flow issues. There was a message to ring Mitchell.

'How's it going?' Blake asked, from a house phone.

'They're safely here. At police headquarters. I've not been allowed in yet,' he replied, showing his impatience 'But that's not why I called. I've just heard something good from my American counterpart sitting here beside me. The Japanese wife of the FBI man, Trent, has been released. Unharmed. They left her by some freeway and she eventually got to a police station. We need to get this news to Trent.'

Blake was thrilled for his new American friend, and wished now he had after all told Mitchell about their adventures. 'That's good. But why are you telling me?'

Mitchell snorted. 'I knew something didn't hang together when you pretended to disappear. So I had a check run on passenger lists. I know damn well you both travelled over from Hong Kong on the same flight. And sat next to each other. Credit us with some competence!'

Blake squirmed. 'I'm sorry. I know I should have told you. But he made me promise. His wife's life was on the line, and we figured the only way to move things along was to reach Sool direct – through Park.'

'Heaven preserve us from amateurs. Trent at least should have

known better,' Mitchell snapped. 'So where is he? He needs to know the news. Fast. He's dangerous. A loose cannon.'

'I don't know. He stayed with Park, and must have lost or broken the mobile phone. That was our only way of keeping in touch. Wherever Park is, Richard'll be close by. And you're right. He seems a pretty nice guy underneath. But all of this . . . Right now I'd say he's capable of anything.'

Mitchell put his hand over the mouthpiece and updated the American. 'Understood. We'll do what we can,' he said, resignedly. 'If you hear from him I want to know. Right away. Got that?'

'Got it.' Blake hung up and sighed. The poor guy. Still out there somewhere, not knowing the good news and planning something dramatic. One man against the massed ranks of Sool, the Americans and Mitchell's people.

Jane left the interrogation room exhausted. First the Koreans had asked her endless questions about Sool, his friends and his opinions. They were especially interested in his Chinese contacts, to the extent that she began to think they suspected him of being a spy. What they probed most deeply and persistently, however, was their brief time in the North. Why had they gone there? Who had Sool seen? Had he been treated like an honoured guest of the government? Of the Dear Leader, Kim Jong-il? On and on, they had pressed, not satisfied with her answers.

At last they had let in the two Westerners to ask their own questions. This time the probing, especially from the fatherly but shrewd Englishman, was more about Sool's attitude to the Japanese. They knew about Sool's mother, and obviously thought that Jane might have picked up on something involving a Russian and some plan to attack Tokyo. But beyond Sool's exceptional hatred for the Japanese, she knew nothing – and they seemed to believe her. At one point, to prove that Sool and she were no longer together, she showed them the livid marks on her back and arms. The female officer who had strip-searched her on arrival had already seen much more. Sool had kidnapped and beaten her, she insisted. They had not been close for some time.

Finally, she had been asked if she would co-operate in being tested on a lie-detector, to check her answers about Japan and Tokyo. Figuring that if she refused it would be worse for her, and confident of her own innocence, she readily agreed. At last, they

had seemed satisfied, and agreed to let her go to the hotel, where she should consider herself effectively under house arrest for the time being.

Mitchell had informed Blake that she was on her way, and he met her outside as her car drew up. She looked ill and about ready to collapse, but they hugged and kissed, to the obvious discomfort of the Korean and Japanese businessmen standing alongside waiting for their limousines. Once he had helped her check in, he went up with her to her room, on the twenty-second floor of the new wing, and kissed her properly. Then he insisted that she had her bath and a couple of hours' sleep before they had dinner together. They had a lot to catch up on.

When he came back to collect her, the transformation was stunning. She looked as though she had walked off the pages of *Vogue*. The coral-pink silk dress was low and short, and would have looked tarty on anyone less beautiful. The professional model in her, however, knew exactly the effect she wanted. Her hair was up, emphasising her long neck, and the make-up hid the remaining traces of bruising. He had booked them into the Schoenbrunn Restaurant, thirteen floors above, and they made quite an entrance among the international diners.

Blake ordered a bottle of Krug while they perused the menus, touching his glass to hers. 'To us?' he asked.

She looked at him seriously. 'Don't mess with me, John,' she replied, the rawness of her nerves evident. 'Don't keep making out we've got some big future. You don't owe me anything. You don't have to pretend to be serious just because we've slept together a few times.'

This took him aback, and for once he thought about what she had said before defensively contradicting it. The truth was that he did target vulnerable women, he did use his way with words and contrive half-hints at serious relationships more often than he cared to acknowledge. Was this thing with Jane really any different? The bottom line was how serious was he really about living with, making a real commitment to, possibly marrying, Jane Field? She had been right to ask.

For himself, he found the answer wonderfully simple. 'We've known each other . . . how long? Three weeks? We've had a bit of time together in Vegas. And Milan. Yet I feel we've been together for years. I respect you. The you as a professional. For making it

to the top in your career. And I'm in love with the other you. The vulnerable you. The you with the wing down. The someone I want to take care of and do my caveman bit with. I also know you as a loyal, caring individual. Even the way you stood by Sool, right until the end. Giving him the benefit of the doubt for so long. And last – not first – I'm constantly captivated by the outer you. I know you hate all this, but I still can't take my eyes off you I like looking at you, being near you. Being seen with you. It feels like I've always had a gap in me that's been Jane-shaped. You make me whole. I don't want to lose that. I don't want to lose you.'

She looked down and swirled her glass, making the bubbles fizz. 'That was quite a speech,' she said at last. 'And as I get old and ugly, what then?'

He took her hand, laughing. 'The beautiful don't get old and ugly like the rest of us,' he said. 'They simply acquire patina. And then become even more interesting.'

She laughed with him, clouds lifting from her eyes. A stocky waiter walked past, bulging in his dinner suit, like a snooker referee. He was theatrically carrying two sorbet glasses pouring out bubbling clouds of dry ice 'smoke'. They were laid before an old Western couple, both in their eighties. The silver-haired man leaned over and kissed his wife on the cheek as they marvelled at the concoction and the attention it had aroused.

'See,' Blake smiled. 'That could be us in forty years' time. When the kids have left home.' He too leaned over and kissed Jane chastely on the cheek.

She squeezed his hand. At least she had solved one issue. She now knew that Blake really was serious about her, truly meant it when he said he loved her. As she had known intuitively for some time, he was hers if she wanted him. But that was the real question now. Did she?

25

Blake was feeling good. The briefing with Sool and Park in the SGT building had gone well. They had barely changed a word of his drafts, and the final, if long-winded, releases were now in the press packs. The turnout among the international media was superb. Everyone was there, including eight camera crews, still jostling with each other. The top table and lectern had sprouted countless microphones for the radio journalists. The only problem was they had not allowed for enough chairs, the broadcast crews taking up so much room. But Blake always liked to have a good few standing. It added to the theatre of an event.

He was also feeling good about Jane. She still seemed a little distant, but that was only to be expected. And he thought their tender love-making last night had been very special. She had asked if she could come to the press conference herself, and he had put her near the back, figuring that Sool might be distracted if he saw her there. Mitchell, Miss Wilkins and Richter had also decided to come and were sitting together in the front row, beside the seat in front of the speaker's lectern reserved for Blake himself. He was there in

a direct eyeline to prompt Sool, if needed – or to fix anything that went wrong, like the sound system crashing or whistling feedback, or the hotel accidentally switching on the musak or patching in staff announcements over the speakers. Like cleaners in the adjoining conference room deciding to vacuum, or noisily slamming down crockery for some later function. Or, more strategically, to take over the management of the conference if problems occurred, like Sool drying up, to call time if the conference went on too long, if journalists started shouting interruptions or demanding the question session they would refuse to give.

With a last look around, and with the time now exactly noon, Blake pushed through the crowd to the door next to the top table and into the ante-room where he had left Sool with Park and the uniformed policeman the authorities had assigned to him. Like Jane, Sool was still very much under effective house arrest until the Korean police were satisfied, his passport withheld. Also there to join them on the top table was the chairman of the task force.

Showtime, Blake thought to himself, in his element now and on a high. 'Time to begin, Chairman,' he said to the nervous-looking Sool. 'Please go through now. As agreed, Mr Park will introduce you in Korean and English.' The whole event was then to be conducted in English by Sool for the benefit of the world media, although he had agreed to repeat the key passage of his statement towards the end in Korean for the four national-language TV stations – EBS, KBS, MBC and SBS – and radio.

Blake went to sit next to Mitchell, clutching his copy of the speech. He would dearly have liked to have arranged for an autocue system to help Sool, and to persuade him to lift his eyes from his notes. There had not been enough time, however, and in any event Sool had not liked the system when they had rehearsed with it in preparation for Hong Kong.

The press conference would go on too long, Blake knew. Sool's 'statement' ran to over two thousand words, but that was what he had wanted. Something of that length would never have been sanctioned in Europe. But finally Blake was turning over the penultimate page as Sool came to the end, his voice having held up well.

It was then that the commotion at the back began. One of Globecom's people on the door could be heard politely arguing with someone. Then voices were raised, and suddenly there was

a figure shoving its way violently forward, sending camera crews and photographers sprawling.

Blake stood up to look around and saw Richard Trent bearing down towards Sool, who by now had stopped talking and was staring, open-mouthed. He saw Trent's hand move inside his jacket and then his gun being raised. 'Richard! No! NO!' he screamed. 'She's free. Your wife's free!'

But Trent could hear nothing above his own heartbeat and the mêlée around him. Mitchell was also on his feet shouting, his eyes moving automatically to the policeman at the side of the stage. The young officer's face and posture were frozen in indecision, but already his training was taking over, his hand drawing his automatic.

'Lie down!' Trent barked at Sool. 'On the floor!' It was obvious that he had not seen the policeman and assumed that, like a fox in a chicken coop, an armed man at a press conference could easily dictate events.

Mitchell stared at the odd looking pistol in Trent's hand and immediately recognised it as a marine flare-gun, presumably the only weapon he had been able to get his hands on, bought from some chandler's At close range, however, it was no less lethal than any other gun.

That was certainly what Trent had decided, having despaired of getting hold of a firearm in squeaky-clean Seoul. His plan was to hold the pistol at Sool's head and broadcast to the world that this man had ordered his wife to be kidnapped. He would not be freed until she was. In his pocket was a roll of gaffer tape to wrap around his right wrist and Sool's neck, before he then taped his finger to the trigger That way he could sit in front of the cameras for as long as it took, and never drop his guard. It was all he had. He had not learned of the press conference until early that morning, having followed Park to SGT, and this was the best idea he could come up with in the time. Crude but, he felt, effective.

Then several things happened at once. Blake pushed past Mitchell to get to Trent. Park was up and throwing himself forward to protect Sool, still rooted to the spot. The police officer had adopted the classic firing position, left hand cupping the right and palming the stock. And still Trent continued to push forward, now just feet from Sool. The police officer shouted something, Blake got

a hand to Trent, just toppling him off balance, and two deafening retorts boomed out.

It was several long seconds before any sense could be made of the jumble of bodies intertwined and writhing on the floor. Blake was the first to disentangle himself, suddenly standing bolt upright in a state of shock. Blood was gushing from his head and down on to his chest. A bullet had torn in under his chin and out of the left side of his face, taking with it teeth and fragments of jawbone. Jane screamed and rushed to him. Mitchell held him up, and then laid him down gently on the floor again as he passed out. Trent was unhurt, and also went to help Blake, dropping the gun. Sool then got to his feet, having been bowled over by a flying tackle from Park. There was a little blood on his shirt. Park's blood. And the young Korean, lying face down, was not moving. One of the journalists knelt, turned him over and immediately started shouting loudly for an ambulance. Mitchell's experienced eye knew that it was already too late for that, however. The second bullet had missed Trent by an inch, hitting Park in the left shoulder-blade and travelling on into the heart.

The young police officer was talking frantically into his radio, his hands shaking, and already the room was filling with uniformed officers. One of them was obviously senior. He attempted to take control of the rising panic in the crowded room, now reeking of cordite and gore. He made straight for the smirking and uninjured Sool, clearing a way through to get him to safety. Miss Wilkins was following them out when a short, very old Japanese man who had been attending determinedly blocked their way. In other circumstances he would have seemed comical. The belted white Burberry trenchcoat looked far too big, as did the thick-lensed spectacles perched on his button nose. His face, however, was intense and drawn. 'Nothing to say!' the police commander said angrily at him. 'News conference over! Clear the way!'

But the old man was now up close to Sool, whispering something, and staring wildly. His right arm flashed backwards and a knife was driven two-handed with lightning speed and surprising force hard into Sool's stomach. Then, as the blade came to rest deep inside, somehow finding even greater, almost superhuman power, the octogenarian made three upward thrusts, each lifting the now-dying Sool briefly on to his toes like a puppet before he finally crumpled to the ground.

The man then immediately opened his coat, tore at his shirt, and plunged the knife into himself. He gave out an involuntary short bark of pain, fell to his knees, resting momentarily to compose himself, and made an attempt at self-disembowelment. His strength was gone however, and he slumped forward before he could complete the task, falling dead on top of Sool. Miss Wilkins, barely able to take in what had happened, threw herself down by Sool, kneeling in the growing lake of the two men's intermingled blood. He was trying to speak, mouthing something. As she put her head close to his, he made a last effort, his eyes wide and a look of horror on his face.

'What? Tell me,' she urged.

'Father!' he hissed. 'Father . . .'

She looked down at the body of the old Japanese man, prostrate across him, shielding Sool's terrible wounds from her. Then she knew. This had been Sool's real father. He had come to end the horror, with his own hands. He had come to end his shame, and drive off the devils. Something drew Sool's head upwards briefly in his last seconds of life. Miss Wilkins followed his eyes, turning to see Sool Kyung-Wha in the sea of faces. She bowed slightly to her nephew. Sool stared, bowed his head in response, and died in Miss Wilkins's arms.

John Blake opened his eyes and tried to focus. He was completely disoriented. Where, when . . . Who?

Then his vision began to clear. It was Jane. Looking angelic. Smiling encouragingly at him. She came over and kissed him carefully on the temple. 'Welcome back,' she said. 'You had us all worried there.'

He now noticed other people. Mitchell and Trent.

He made to say something, but found he could not move his jaw. He panicked, and put his hands to his face. Jane caught them in her own hands and held them down. 'Easy, easy,' she said. 'You've just come through an operation. You're going to be fine. Really fine. But your mouth is wired up for now. You took a shot in the face. Lost a few teeth. No big deal.'

In fact the bullet had passed through the lower mandible, severing the trigeminal nerve, taking out three upper molars and exiting through the cheek. The surgeon had warned her that the feeling in his lips and lower mouth might never return, but this was no time to tell him that.

'You took that shot for me, John,' Trent said, putting a hand on his shoulder. 'Thanks. It was real brave.'

'And your wife? She's fine now?' Blake asked, speaking through his teeth, his throat sore and dry.

'She's just fine. In fact I hope you'll get to meet her. She's flying over right now to be with me. Her plane touches down in a couple of hours. I have to stay and face the music with the authorities here for what I did yesterday. I can't exactly deny everything when the whole sorry mess was televised live all round the world.'

'Can't your people help?'

'We'll see. But I'm not too popular with the Bureau either. I've resigned to save them embarrassment. It's time for something new anyhow. I didn't like the guy I became out there. That really wasn't me.'

'And Sool? What happened? It's all a blur.'

Mitchell came over to the bed. 'Park's dead. Accidentally shot. And so's Sool. He was stabbed to death by an eighty-two-year-old Japanese man. His natural father,' he explained. 'I've got most of the background now. The Japanese police had been working hard behind the scenes on the murders of the girls. They figured out early on the common denominator. All from families where someone – usually the grandfather – had served with the army at the end of the war in the same camp – near Shanghai. When interviewed, the other common thread was a particularly beautiful Korean "comfort woman" some of them shared. Keeping her exclusively for themselves. An unusual situation. The FBI had routinely kept them informed of Trent's suspicions of Sool's involvement in the videos. So they conducted DNA tests on all the survivors to compare them with Sool.'

'But how would they have his DNA fingerprint?' Jane asked.

'It's not too hard to get one covertly,' Trent said. 'You need just a dozen or so hairs, with roots. They could have got his barber to help there. Or a swab from the inside of his mouth. A scrape of epithelial cells from the inner wall of the cheek. It's painless. A dentist can easily do it without arousing suspicion.'

'And the old man. That really was his father?' she asked, her feelings about Sool's death not yet fully formed She had desperately wanted to leave him, to get away for ever. But despite what she now knew about him, she was far from sure that she wanted him dead. Butchered, just like the poor girls on the videos.

'Without doubt. They must have told him the results. And Sool's identity. I know the Japanese were planning to act on their intelligence, but the old man got to him first. Apparently he had been in Korea posing as a tourist for almost a month. Waiting for an opportunity.'

They fell silent for a while, reflecting on the many tragedies the original crime over fifty years earlier had spawned. Blake was the first to speak. 'But at least it's over now,' he said. 'The carnage ended with Sool's death, as it had begun with his birth.'

Mitchell shook his head. 'No. It didn't,' he said, pulling on his topcoat and making to leave. He had a plane to catch back to London 'When you see a newspaper, you'll read about an atrocity yesterday, in Tokyo. That was what I came here to stop.'

'The bomb?' Trent had already seen the coverage on the morning satellite TV news. 'Are you saying Sool caused that? The speculation was that it had to be the Aum Shinrikyo sect. The cult accused of the sarin gas attacks on the subway.'

'What's happened?' Blake asked.

'A huge car bomb was remote-detonated at Otemachi in Tokyo. It rocked the whole area, blowing out windows in the nearby Nikkei Building, and even the Fuji Bank, which is four blocks away.' Mitchell spoke as if everyone was as familiar with Tokyo as himself. 'The target building for the blast was virtually destroyed, with major casualties.'

'What building? Who was the target?' Blake asked.

'You tell me. Which building, which organisation is at the heart of Japan's industrial might and prestige? If you wanted to target all of Japan's commercial leaders, together, where would you look? If you wanted to wipe out all the old men, all the surviving Second World War soldiers still running Japan's great industrial conglomerates, where would you put your boot full of Semtex?'

Blake knew immediately. The Keidanren. The hugely powerful business organisation that represents all the leading Japanese companies, the old *zaibatsu*, and over a hundred trade associations. More powerful than the CBI in Britain, the BDI in Germany or the Patronat in France, it is greatly respected by the Japanese government and key ministries, including MITI, and openly courted by overseas royalty, presidents and prime ministers of governments desperate to attract incoming investment and jobs. 'And was there

a council meeting taking place?' he asked, already knowing the answer.

'Of course. Attended, as you know, by the presidents or chairmen of organisations that account for a huge part of the economy. The top twenty trading companies alone have a turnover equal to a third of Japan's national income. The blast killed twelve people, including five chairmen. Injuries are horrific, with thirty more in intensive care.' Mitchell looked at his watch. 'The Nikkei and yen have collapsed owing to the deep uncertainty caused by the leadership vacuum at so many of the corporations.'

Blake reflected on the SGT derivatives contracts. Days earlier, and with different delivery dates on the futures contracts, the effect on the Nikkei could have saved the corporation. But now Sool's spiteful, posthumous last throw of the dice amounted to no more than malevolent vengeance. 'If his life's passion was to damage Japan and its old men, then he's certainly succeeded.'

'Succeeded where I failed. That's about the size of it, yes,' Mitchell replied. He turned to Trent. 'I've got an embassy car outside. Can I give you a lift to Kimpo to meet your wife? The driver can wait and bring you back.'

He said his goodbyes, thanking Blake and promising to see him when he was fit enough to leave hospital and fly home. Trent promised to visit the next day with Fuji. Then, at last, Blake was alone with Jane, who sat on the bed, fondly stroking his hair. 'Some PR guy you make. With his goddamn mouth wired shut!'

He attempted to smile, but it hurt too much. 'Less can be more,' he joked. 'We charge for what we say, not how much we say. That's the theory anyway.' Despite his lingering grogginess from the anaesthetic, he could sense that something was weighing on her. Seeing her long-term lover murdered was traumatic enough, yet he felt there was something else. Something he would not like. 'So. What happens now?'

She shrugged her shoulders, avoiding his eyes. 'Whatever.'

'You'll go back to New York?'

'I've got some modelling jobs in the book,' she lied, weakly. 'Things I have to do.'

'I'll come and see you. I'm there on business a lot.' He knew that inexplicably he had lost her, and it hurt like hell. Deep down he had known she had never reciprocated. Not really. Whereas for him it had been something very special. That gap in him, that Jane-shaped

gap, ached and gnawed at him already. 'When are you going? No point in hanging around here. I'll be out soon, I'm sure.' He was trying hard to make it easy on her.

She knew exactly what she was doing to him and hated herself. There had been too much hurt, too much pain already. And now he seemed so ill and vulnerable – his hair matted and greasy, his face pale and drawn, the wounds raw and ugly. He looked for the first time all of his forty-two years. His precious confidence, his stock-in-trade, was, she knew, in tatters, his ability to speak – his primary currency – badly impaired, perhaps permanently. Not much sign of his self-indulgent, self-diagnosed accidie there now, she thought. But she desperately needed her own space. 'There's a flight tomorrow,' she said. 'But I hate to leave you like this. I can stay till you're back on your feet and out of here. No problem.'

'No. Korea has too many ghosts for you now. Please. Head off home. Then when I'm next over you can really spoil me. How's that sound? Is it a date?'

She looked down at him, her turquoise eyes glistening. 'It's a date,' she promised, and hugged him for a while. 'And you get well. You hear?' Kissing his brow again, she got up to leave.

'I hear,' he said, his voice cracking.

Blinking hard, and with one last brave smile, she turned and closed the door quietly behind her.

EPILOGUE

'You seem grumpy,' Miss Wilkins chided.

They had just taken off on the thirteen-hour direct flight to London. 'Well, I haven't exactly achieved what I set out to do, have I?' Mitchell replied He also knew that with all the service cut-backs, this might prove to be his last operation in the field.

'From what you told me, you did damn well to collate the intelligence about the attack in the first place. You got as far as telling the Japanese where it would take place, when, why, and by whom. Short of also dismantling the bomb yourself I can't see what more you or anyone could have done. *And* you got Richter and me to co-operate on the worm thing. Saved the world, and all that.'

As ever, he found her robust positivism refreshing. 'You know, put that way, it sounds a lot better. I think I'll have another gin and let you write my report for me.' He pressed the call button on the seat arm. 'Another Scotch for you?'

'Why not?'

'What's happening to Richter?' he asked, trying to catch the stewardess's eye as she passed.

'The task force chairman has given him a job, in California. He promised that the streets were paved with blondes and junk food And perhaps they are. I hope so. Once he sorts out his spot o bother with the British police, he deserves a chance. He's a nice boy under all the shyness.'

'And what of you? Once you've sorted out your own bit of bothe with the police.'

'Oh, I've got a feeling that charges will not be pressed. Just a feeling,' she said enigmatically, before reclining her seat fo some rest.

The flight touched down slightly early, at 3.15 in the afternoon and they said their goodbyes at the luggage carousel. 'You're a remarkable woman, Miss Wilkins,' he said, offering his hand.

She ignored it and kissed him primly on the cheek. 'Oh, I think Emily would be all right after all we've been through. Don't you Peregrine?'

'I certainly do, Emily,' he said, touched. 'And please. Perry. Not Peregrine. I didn't inherit my parents' sense of humour.'

'We'll see each other again, I expect.'

'Yes. There'll be a lot of paperwork to catch up on. Goodbye for now, Emily,' he said, putting his case on a trolley. 'And I hope it works out for you.'

'Hope what works out?' she asked sharply.

But he just smiled. 'It. *It*,' was all he would say.

She went white with worry. He knew. The wily old bird knew. He must have been monitoring *all* the calls.

He was long gone by the time she cleared customs and saw the driver holding up a card with her name on it. The uniformed man took her case and led her across to the dark oyster Bentley Continental R. Despite its £180,000 price tag, it was only a two-door four-seater. A three-seater allowing for the driver. The fiftysomething man in the front, Jamie MacIntyre, Chiasmus's MI before he was sacked in favour of David Mann, had to get out to let her into the back. She smiled at him, an old friend. Then, settling into the tan hide contoured seat, she turned to her fellow passenger and impatiently demanded, 'Well? Well? Have they agreed?' Her eyes searched his patrician profile for some kind of clue.

Lieutenant-General Sir Lucien Walters looked at her with his faded blue eyes. The driver was pulling smoothly away from the termina Getting nowhere, she turned to her old colleague in the front. 'Wi

you tell me?' she pleaded, leaning forward. But her attention was diverted by the sound of the sudden explosion beside her.

Sir Lucien was handing her a flute of champagne, his earlier poker face now creased in a broad grin. 'We got it! We got it!' he said, excitedly.

'We did? We did!' she almost screamed.

'I may be an old out-to-grass soldier,' he said. 'But . . .'

'*But you know how many beans make five!*' Miss Wilkins finished the sentence for him, making them all laugh.

'And what happens next?' she asked, gulping the wine.

'It happens right now. We're on our way to see the accountant, Chiasmus's official receiver,' Sir Lucien said. 'His duty is to get the best price and try and sell the business as a going concern. Management buyouts are almost always the preferred option these days. He knows the amount we hoped to raise, and was very positive about it. And as of this morning we've actually got the venture capital arranged. It's a formality. Chiasmus is ours! It's really ours! Thanks to you, Miss Wilkins. To your, er, unconventional way of ridding us of Sool Kay-Sheen. And to your very early – some might say "insider" – tip-off about SGT's imminent collapse.

'That gave us a flying start over any other potential buyers. And frankly we've got it for a song by making it clear that all the key existing operational management would walk. Leaving the receiver with precious little left to sell.' He laughed. 'And then, once we've signed contracts, I'll be having a little career chat with David Mann. He knows absolutely nothing about any of this, of course. We'll see how *he* likes being "rightsized".'

'Why don't *you* tell him, Emily?' Jamie MacIntyre suggested. 'That really would be sweet.'

She looked away. 'Oh no,' she replied. 'I've had a bellyful of revenge. No more. That's all behind me now.'

'That I can understand. But I hope there's at least still plenty of *fire* left in that belly,' Sir Lucien said, prodding her tummy with a piece of paper and then laying it out on the drinks table in front of her with a pen.

She looked down at the form. 'What is it?' she asked.

'It's a Form 288. To send to Companies House. You have to complete it on becoming a company director,' he said, eyes twinkling. 'You will, I hope, accept our invitation to join the

new board. To join us in working to re-create the old Chiasmus s
Say yes, Emily. Say yes.'

She beamed, nodding her agreement, not trusting herself to
speak.

'Excellent. A toast, I think. To Miss Wilkins. To us. And to the
new Chiasmus.'

'To the new Chiasmus,' she repeated.

When John Blake lands the contract to handle personal PR for Sool Kay-Sheen, Chairman of SGT, he knows he's facing a challenge. After years of success, the Korean multi-millionaire has suddenly turned into a rogue elephant on the world stage, going beyond commercial risk-taking to reckless gambling with his corporation's future. But Blake doesn't anticipate becoming embroiled in a vicious international conspiracy involving high finance, pornography . . . and mass murder.

GRAHAM LANCASTER

Graham Lancaster spent seven years with the CBI before co-founding Biss Lancaster plc, one of the UK's leading PR consultancies. He is also chairman of the largest PR group in Europe, with extensive experience of international business. His previous four books have been widely published and translated around the world.

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